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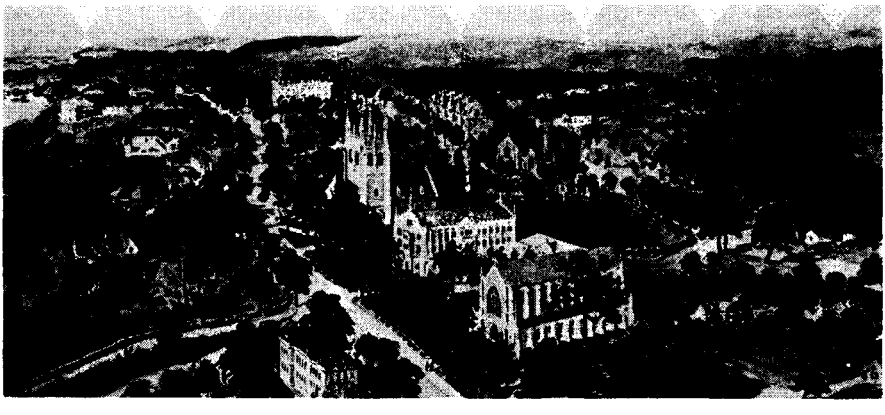

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A new book of translations by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

DANA GIOIA: Mottetti: *Poems of Love*, by Eugenio Montale. Graywolf Press. $14.95.

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Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

In the course of Robert McDowell's rather haughty review of anthologies, he makes an error which I would not bother to correct were it not the cornerstone of his attack on our anthology *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late*, edited by Andrei Codrescu.

As the only evidence of Codrescu's desire to "deliberately distort the facts," McDowell cites as "an obvious example" the copy on the back cover, which contains an error describing the number of poets in the book under the age of forty. McDowell goes on to pontificate about "Codrescu's pragmatic cynicism." The cover copy was not written by Codrescu, nor does it say it was written by him, nor is cover copy normally written by the author of a book on which it appears; in fact, Codrescu did not see it until it was part of the published book. McDowell's comments range far beyond the merely critical and are defamatory. He owes Andrei Codrescu an apology, in print, in *The Hudson Review.*

New York, New York

John G. H. Oakes
Co-Publisher,
Four Walls Eight Windows

Robert McDowell replies:

John G. H. Oakes's claim that I used the back cover copy of *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late* as the cornerstone of my "attack" on the anthology is inaccurate. In my essay, I focused on Andrei Codrescu's introduction and the poetry itself, citing numerous examples of distorted historical fact in the former and criticizing the quality of much of the latter. At one point, I also mention the glaring error, which Mr. Oakes admits to, appearing in the back cover copy.

The publisher's attempt to dismiss my argument by exaggerating the importance of that comment is consistent, perhaps, with the tone and content of the anthology in question, but it is poor scholarship. In this case, the "haughty" and "defamatory" comments come from the editor and publisher, not from the critic. Do I owe Mr. Codrescu an apology? I don't think so. But both he and the publisher might do well to consider apologizing to poetry readers everywhere.

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Comment:

Life's Bright Parenthesis: The Example of Robert Penn Warren

OSCAR WILDE ASSERTED THAT CRITICISM is the only civilized form of autobiography, and—who knows?—he may be right. But I have more than a sneaking suspicion that Wilde is gloriously wrong as only Wilde could be in his startling pronouncements about life and art. Of course I must have a rubric under which to present my essay in autobiography, which is an effort at the same time to set down what may be only the commonplace particulars of my thirty-five years of responding to Robert Penn Warren as writer, man of letters, and human being. As I write this, I am thinking of a new poem by Peter Davison entitled "Autobiographer":

> He struck an attitude, head bowed
> to show us all that all he had mingled freely
> but not enough to hold responsible
> for much. He sketched some scenes: other men acted
> while he stood still, helpless to avert
> any event that would lead to regrettable outcomes.
> He strained to get the tone of it just right,
> confessing fears of climbing, fears of storm,
> and his repeated lack of influence:
> to write that down seemed to relieve his mind.
> He had troubled the waters of his time
> sufficiently to claim a rank above
> anonymous, a notch below obscure,
> a name that didn't count for much, misdeeds
> that made nobody mad. He chose his life
> to sit well on the page, a shapely story
> told well enough to publish, not to read.

Davison's poem, alas, may describe the present occasion more accurately than Wilde's axiom, but Wilde's remark does tease at your mind, especially when you turn it around to read that autobiography is the only civilized form of criticism. In these contentious days, God knows, as do the rest of us, that criticism is usually not only the most uncivilized form of discourse but the most turgid, self-regarding, and obscurantist.

Joseph Blotner, who is now well launched on the sea of Robert

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Penn Warren's life, set me to pondering my own relation with Warren during a conversation Blotner and I had sometime ago. I promised him a long letter; instead, as time went on, I decided that writing a letter would dissipate the impulse to write an essay and thereby come to grips with one of the most formative experiences of my intellectual life. Of course writing about *anything* is a means of exploring that subject's power and significance for you, but at the same time writing about a subject, particularly a personal experience, can make that subject fizzle or turn sour on you. That is one cardinal aspect of the complicated transaction or performance that writing involves.

When E. B. White was a young reporter working in Seattle, he asked an experienced editor at the paper how to report a given story—"how to put the intricacies of a second-string felony into deathless prose." "Just say the words," the man replied. White said that he found the advice exceptionally good and that, years later, he was still "trying to say the words." Such is my effort now.

In the summer of 1955 I had just completed my inglorious high-school education, and I was awaiting the onset of college without enthusiasm since I was immured—by financial necessity—in Lexington, Kentucky, and would be attending a small college that held few prospects—aside from boredom—for me. It was humiliating that some of my best friends were heading to Yale, Princeton, and the University of North Carolina.

In the meantime I had a summer job in addition to my paper route to divert me, and since I have always relished work of nearly every kind, I was not feeling very sorry for myself. My days began with the paper route at 5:00, and then about 7:30 I went on to work at setting tile and doing various other things, including rudimentary carpentry and plumbing, for a man named Victor Waltz. I learned a good deal more from Vic, who had attended college and was widely read, and from his various cranky customers and bosses, than I learned the next year in college—perhaps the next two or three years, come to think of it. This isn't to say that Vic did much to guide my reading, although he did lend me various books—including one of Hemingway's worst novels, *To Have and Have Not*—just as I lent him books; but I learned a fair amount about the ways of the world from him and a black man named Slim, who also worked for Vic—in addition to learning a great deal about setting tile.

Vic typified the various subcontractors working in the construction business in his solitary independence, his whimsical and self-indulgent behavior (which included considerable philandering, he regularly bragged to me), and his hard-working and hard-drinking ways. He was anything but typical in his intellectual interests, which were fairly considerable, for he was as willing to use his mind to read and discuss and argue about a novel as he was to bring it to bear in

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making an estimate for a job or in carrying out the intricacies of renovating a bathroom or replacing a floor all the way to the joists or rebuilding a fireplace. Vic also liked to gamble in various ways, and we were always betting about different things. One result was that, for the only time in my life, I won more often than I lost when it came to betting; and I got a good many free lunches for knowing more about something vaguely intellectual than he did. He usually—but by no means always—paid up.

My parents were not among Vic's fans, partly because he was often late in picking me up or getting me home and partly for other reasons. I was afraid that they would fire Vic, so to speak, and that I would be left with only my paper route for work and income; but things never quite came to that. My closest call came when Slim telephoned the house one night. He was almost incoherent with drink and was aggressively unruly, and he had the comical but unfunny and misplaced notion that I had taken his pay from Vic and not given it to him. Had my father answered the phone, my job probably would have ended then and there. My father, a stern Calvinist by nature who agreed thoroughly with Warren's father's belief that a man must deny himself—and a special agent of the FBI by profession—would have greeted a call from a drunk with less enthusiasm than anyone I can think of; but Slim's color would have made no difference to him.

I liked the job, especially for its humor. Funny things kept happening, and I was around when some of them occurred. I wasn't there the day that the newly married young woman wearing her peignoir asked Slim if he, who had painted her bathroom the day before, would like to see the place that her husband had touched the night previous. Slim, who never visualized a handprint near the light switch in the bathroom, contemplated this prospect for a long moment and then answered soberly: "Nome, I don't think I had better do that, but, tell you what, I'll split a beer with you."

This was one of the raciest things that had happened in my circumscribed world since I was delivering papers two summers previous. One afternoon, while riding to my second route on the bus, I was stamping the afternoon customers' papers with the notice I AM COLLECTING TONIGHT. At one stop a great many people suddenly got on the bus, and before I could get my papers, stamp pad, and stamp out of the way, a well-dressed young woman walked quickly to the back of the bus and sat down hard on the stamp. When she got off some blocks later, I saw the words I AM COLLECTING TONIGHT stamped across one haunch. Needless to say, I was too embarrassed and fearful and tongue-tied to say anything to her.

Even though books were not the center of this busy—often frantic—quarter, Vic and I still discussed them when he wasn't worrying about his relations with the public-housing authority for which we installed tens of thousands of feet of floor tile in the apartments of people whom I hardly knew existed until that time, or his jobs with

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Sears, Roebuck, then as now a hopelessly incompetent bureaucracy offering little more than hope to its beleaguered customers. The best jobs often involved new houses and contractors, just as you would think. One of those contractors, it is delicious to remember, had been a professor of philosophy at the little college that I was going to attend—Transylvania; but I never had the courage to ask him what his old life entailed. I was more interested in his new profession—building houses; and the gruff old man had little to say to me, even after I cut his lawn one day—or cut his mistress's lawn, to be more precise. (What those ugly old people might do in bed was a subject that staggered my imagination, and I did not ponder it. Only Dickens might have captured their physiognomies, and the inventor of the Smallweeds might have called this pair the Greatweeds.)

D. H. Mahoney, the ex-professor of philosophy who was now doing well building houses in the suburbs of Lexington, was probably as little interested in his old discipline as I, a callow youth; but he might have instructed me in the novel that I slowly read during the course of that summer and that did much to change my life—Robert Penn Warren's *World Enough and Time*. That same summer I gulped down Andrew Lytle's *The Long Night* in two nights and then just barely staggered through the long hot days that followed. But *World Enough and Time* is not a novel that can be read at two or three sittings. It was over two years later before I read, in Donald Davidson's course on Hardy and Conrad, Warren's words about the philosophical novelist: he is "one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values, for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration, for whom the urgency of experience, no matter how vividly and strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience." In December of 1957, as I read those words about *Nostromo*, I was a little more prepared to deal with Warren's subtleties as a critic and novelist than in the summer of 1955. That passage remains, for me, essential to a proper understanding of RPW's greatness.

During that summer—and for almost the next eighteen months—I was persuaded that my profession was going to be civil engineering—and that if I did not build roads and bridges, I might build houses or, to be more grandiose, whole subdivisions. So working around contractors and for subcontractors (Vic sometimes farmed me out to carpenters and block layers) was not far from what I thought I would eventually do to make a living. Such was my innocence and optimism in those halcyon days of infinite possibility that it never occurred to me that I would become allied to a motley crew that can be called a profession only by default—and whose hopelessly impractical members seldom even carry pocketknives.

As it happened, I, being a slow learner, took four quarters to divine that engineering was no more my proper vocation than brain surgery. Mediocre to wretched teaching in the sciences and indifferent ability

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in mathematics led me into English literature, in which I could continue reading to my heart's content and pretend upon occasion that I might even read law and pursue a real profession. My parents were charitable enough not to point out my self-indulgence. After all they had encouraged me to read all my life, even though they were dismayed, not to say exasperated, when on occasion they caught me at nine or ten years of age reading under the covers with a flashlight. And I had found not only *The Long Night* at home but *World Enough and Time*, the latter in the autographed Kentucky edition. It had been given to my father by my honorary godmothers, two sisters who taught me as much as my parents. My father used to say that Warren was his favorite author, but I always thought of that as a complicated joke, for he probably preferred, say, Dumas or Tolstoy. He may have been alluding to my seventh-grade teacher, the dreadnought Miss Dalzell, who thought all things associated with Kentucky were the world's best of their kind, including the novels of James Lane Allen. But not those of Robert Penn Warren, whom she never mentioned.

What my parents were more interested in than reading was classical music, an interest that inexorably led to my being indentured to the piano for a year. Ours was more nearly a house of music than of words. What I chiefly learned during that frozen time was how to play scales while reading my way through various books, chiefly the Hardy boys. Neither activity took much brain power or agility, and somehow I never got caught. Or at least I don't think I did. It was easier to read in the light while practicing scales than gasping under the covers with a flashlight. My progress as a reader, you see, was steady as I moved from reading with various impediments to reading only, and reading such books as *World Enough and Time*. But my idea of real reading, much to the consternation of my wife, who could have been a professional violinist, is that it should be accompanied by classical music. At that time I was almost delirious about Rachmaninoff and moving towards Brahms; now my idea of good music is a little more sophisticated—late Beethoven or Bach, with occasional forays into Scarlatti and Telemann and Vivaldi. Indeed, were I to be dispatched to a desert island or a prison and given the choice between, say, the collected works of Bach and the collected works of Shakespeare or James, I would be confronted by a considerable dilemma.

By the time I read "Original Sin: A Short Story" and *All The King's Men*, with Beethoven providing a suitable accompaniment—this was the spring of my sophomore year at Vanderbilt, to which I had transferred from Transylvania—I was thoroughly committed to English, but more nearly as an avocation than a discipline, and throughout college I probably read more outside the curriculum than within. One of the reasons that I would later despise graduate school, most of which appalled me, was that I had no time to read for fun. Now, having escaped the tedium of assigned reading, both as a student and a teacher, I have been punished for my sins of omission and

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commission as a reader by having to read reams and reams of rubbish that is regularly submitted to the *Sewanee Review* and various presses by thousands of people masquerading as writers.

But the real writer to whom this essay is at least titularly devoted, Robert Penn Warren, has offered me a lifetime of reading. By the time I got my B.A. at Vanderbilt I had read *All the King's Men* two or three times and his other novels at least once; I had written a paper for Walter Sullivan about *Night Rider*; I had read *Brother to Dragons* and been emboldened to ask Warren a question in public about it; I had studied his selected essays, not to mention much of the rest of the New Criticism, especially *The Well Wrought Urn*, in great detail; and I had even written a high-falutin paper on the criticism of Warren and R. P. Blackmur, in prose nearly as impenetrable as Blackmur's, for Donald Davidson. Finally, I would publish essays and reviews on Warren at fitful intervals from 1965 on. I would write about his fiction and poetry and nonfiction. But I did not foresee this as an undergraduate and had no notion then of how strongly Warren would influence me and also, in varying ways, my wife and some of our children. When I was courting Susan in the fall of 1959—she was then a Woodrow Wilson fellow at Yale—and gave her a copy of *Brother to Dragons*, neither of us could have predicted what would happen—namely, that our son, who would be born less than two years later, would attend Yale himself and meet Warren there at Cleanth Brooks's home, and that our youngest daughter, while a senior at the University of Georgia in the mid-1980s, would write a paper about "Original Sin: A Short Story" and some related early poems. Nor could I have foreseen that in time I would participate in several literary conferences with Warren and that Susan and I would see him and Mrs. Warren socially in Sewanee and elsewhere.

None of this would have seemed remotely possible to me when Warren came to Vanderbilt my junior year. One fine spring day during that time he lay out on a green at Vanderbilt as casually and naturally as a farmboy might sit on a bale of hay. He was beautifully turned out in a gabardine suit and a paisley tie and elegant Italian shoes, but he might as well have been wearing clodhoppers and bib overalls as he lolled on the grass. Here was a man who knew what Tom Sawyer meant in telling Huck Finn to throw in a little style.

It would be a long time before I fully realized what Warren thought poets should really be doing in a university—namely, acting as a fifth column that would provide a civilizing force both there and, more important, in the society at large. That is one claim he has made for poetry; another is that it "is a way of knowing what kind of a person you can be, getting your reality shaped a little better." "And," he adds, "it's a way of living, and not a parlor trick even in its most modest reaches." Elsewhere he has argued that poetry is a form of knowledge and, more particularly, knowledge of form. He explains: "The form is a vision of knowledge, the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with

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the slain, what was known as shape now known as time, what was known in time now known as shape, a new knowledge. It is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world." That splendid credo appears in "Knowledge and the Image of Man," and I first read it in a *Sewanee Review* that came among four old copies that I purchased from the magazine in a sale held in the late 1950s, the years when some literary quarterlies in this country were having the last of their salad days.

Another essay by Warren that I have regularly reread is his "Pure and Impure Poetry." In it he says that "a poem, to be good, must earn itself. It is a motion toward a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is a motion of no consequence." That essay begins, you may remember, with a fable about the relation of the critic to poetry. In that fable Warren says that there is only one way for the critic to master the poem, which is the wondrous and inexhaustible monster: "You must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle," he tells us. "And even then," he continues, "the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, is assimilated into you, and you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it." So, if you view me as monstrous, remember that Robert Penn Warren is partly responsible for my monstrosity. But, if there is one thing that I know about criticism, it is what Warren says about the critic "who vaingloriously trusts his method to account for the poem": he is doomed to defeat, and he must therefore "always play stooge to the monster." All the sensible and true critic properly wants, as Warren says, "is to give the monster—the poem—a chance to exhibit again its miraculous power, which is poetry."

By now, needless to say, it has been clear for a long time that Robert Penn Warren was more committed to poetry than to any form of prose, even the novel. He agreed with his friend and teacher John Crowe Ransom, who said of poetry:

> Where is the body and solid substance of the world? It seems to have retired into the fulness of memory, but out of this we construct the fulness of poetry, which is counterpart to the world's fulness.
>
> The true poetry has no great interest in improving or idealizing the world, which does well enough. It only wants to realize the world, to see it better.

This is what Warren attempted, with great success, for sixty years and more.

Poetry is, as Ransom suggests and as Warren himself has said, a kind of unconscious autobiography. Warren has written eloquently of this element in his poetry—"how a floating fragment of the past might seem to take on a new shape, or draw things to it, to join with new shapes." And, as he remarks, "what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding. It is the deepest part of the autobiography." In

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another context he has said that our lives may be "our supreme fictions." In any case the poetry is the deepest part of Warren's "autobiography" as it appears in his published work, even including Warren's portrait of his father. He has said that "novels are much more objective for me," whereas "the poems have a much deeper and more immediate personal reference," adding: "This does not necessarily mean autobiography." So the case is complicated, and we ignore the complications at our peril. Yes, every writer writes his autobiography, as Havelock Ellis opined; but autobiography, which is seldom straight or pure, almost never appears as such in fiction or poetry of any real worth and enduring value. As Warren himself had argued, taking poetry as autobiography is "very naive" for a "professed critic."

I doubt very much whether Robert Penn Warren's life was affected one whit by my own or his writing influenced in the slightest by my occasional criticism of it. It would be highly conceited for me to assert the contrary. But his life and work have profoundly affected mine, especially my view of what it is possible for the man of letters and the professional writer to be. It's not, of course, just a matter of style: the image of the beautifully-dressed man reclining at his ease on the college lawn is but one enduring recollection of Warren that remains fresh in my memory. Another comes from his visit to Vanderbilt a year or so later. I escaped from the Vanderbilt hospital, where I had been felled by a textbook case of mononucleosis, to hear a discussion involving Warren, Flannery O'Connor, and Walter Sullivan. Various earnest students, including me, asked various earnest questions, one of the silliest of which involved the term *young writer*. Warren, in fielding the question of What the young writer is to do, resisted saying that the young writer should find another line of work; instead he said: "Play for keeps." Don't think of yourself as writing a "nice little exercise I am doing because I am young, and ought to be forgiven. Nothing will be forgiven. It will stink just as much if you did it as if Hemingway did it. It will be just as bad." Warren told us to hate our elders and be ourselves, for, as he explained, "any writer who is not young had better shut up shop." What he said then of even greater value is that the writer, at his most tormented but at his best, is "alone with the alone." He was talking about, among other things, the necessity of solitude in writing, and the loneliness of writing as a profession. We couldn't have gotten better advice.

Another image derives from a visit of his to Sewanee in the mid-1970s, soon after Susan and I moved to the Cumberland plateau. He is sitting nonchalantly on our camel-backed sofa, which has a few unsightly holes in the fabric. Stuffing occasionally works its way out and falls to the floor. But Red Warren might be on that putative bale of hay or in his own living room or at Lincoln Center. Unlike the widow of a bishop, who had sat nervously in the same spot a few days previous, he is unperturbed and completely at ease. This is one of my wife's favorite memories of a gracious and generous man.

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So there is, for me, the image of the man himself, a human being of singular distinction, as well as that of the man of letters. I join Allen Tate in saying that Warren was the most gifted person I have ever known, but my admiration for the man's work extends to profound respect and admiration for the man himself.

That happens to be the case with other writers, too, most of them my contemporaries, whom I have admired over the years and written about with some regularity. They form an oddly assorted group, ranging from E. B. White and Joseph Mitchell to John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren. I like the self-deprecating humor and other forms of self-mockery, the ego constrained to the point of anonymity, and the rugged independence all these writers demonstrate in their distinctive voices and signatures.

In alluding to Oscar Wilde at the outset of this essay, I was deliberately providing a counterimage to the sensible man of letters, like White or Ransom or Warren, who minds his business and leads a decent and orderly life. The Wildes and Dylan Thomases have encouraged a streak of meanness and irresponsibility among our writers, especially the poets, whose behavior these days has gotten far worse than when in 1944 Malcolm Cowley described some of our more notorious writers as "barroom brawlers, drawing-room wolves, breakers of engagements, defaulters of debts, crying drunks, and suicidal maniacs." In these latter days of the Republic of Letters Cowley's list of sins and sinners takes on a saintly and beatific aspect.

Despite his fundamental goodness and his profound generosity of spirit and action, Warren suffered all his life from a sense of guilt. Once again, I quote Malcolm Cowley. Why, Cowley asks, should guilt "afflict this upright man who has always worked hard and has never taken part in the vendettas of literary life?" He answers the question with his usual sense and sensibility by saying: "We cannot live with the burden of being accomplices in all the sins of our culture. Perhaps the poet's real problem is the Protestant conscience that keeps urging him to be better than a human soul can be." Cowley then addresses his old friend Warren and says: "Heap up the gifts from the world. . . . There cannot be too many of them. They will never outweigh the gifts [you have] bestowed upon the world."

The gifts bestowed by Robert Penn Warren upon this reader are so manifold that I will make no attempt to list them all. Perhaps the greatest of them in a literary sense is that this author may have taught me more about reading and writing than anyone else, even my revered teacher Donald Davidson, although I never had Warren as a classroom teacher. But his example as a man of letters and as a human being, which boils down to the fact that you don't have to be a drunk or a philanderer or an egomaniac to become a successful artist or critic, has been of equal importance to me. No, he does not stand for me as a culture hero or a father figure or a role model, to repair to such obvious trite formulations—dismal clichés that are not even

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properly grammatical. Robert Penn Warren does stand for me as a shining exemplum of the best possibilities not only of the life of the mind and the literary life, but of everyday life in what he calls the world of action and liability. For that I honor him and own up to an unpayable debt of thirty-five years' standing.

GEORGE CORE

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ROBERT M. ADAMS

Montaigne and the Ladies

> *Chacune de mes pieces me faict egalement moy que tout autre. Et nulle autre ne me faict plus proprement homme que cette-cy.*
>
> (III, 5)
>
> Each one of my parts makes me myself just as much as every other one. And no other makes me more properly a man than this one.
>
> (trans. by Donald Frame)

Drawing his wisdom about equally from flip Ovid, solemn Seneca, and semi-serious Rabelais, Montaigne proposes that our desires are piqued and our pleasures heightened by the difficulties they encounter (II, 15). His first examples are all sexual. If her father had not shut up Danae in a tower, Zeus would never have descended in a shower of gold to seduce her. Lycurgus the Spartan lawgiver built it into the marriage-code that husbands could visit their wives only in secret and at long intervals. (The more zestful their encounters, he reasoned, the more likely they would be to engender children of pith, vigor, and sinew. If someone more nervy than the proper husband got over the barriers first, that certainly didn't bother Lycurgus, and perhaps not the lady either.) Paris abducted Helen, not to enjoy her particular charms, but for the perilous pleasure of putting one over on her heavy husband Menelaus. And so on.

Even these early figures of myth and legend were only endorsing an earlier law of nature. Bucks and rams find it necessary to fight one another, to exhaustion if not death, in order to win the (presumed) favor of the female.[1] The strut of

[1] There's always the possibility that she doesn't care which of the battered warriors tramples the other, and would rather bestow her favors on an unbelligerent but affectionate stripling—witness Angelica's preference for little Medoro over battle-crazed Orlando. But the war of the rival suitors has little to do with the lady's real

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the peacock with his impractical ostentation, the thrumming of the prairie chicken, the bugling of the elk in rut, are instinctive procedures of challenge and proof. In the same way, men still fight over women according to the weapons in vogue at their particular time. When Achilles assails Agamemnon over Briseis, it's Aeneas battling Turnus over Lavinia, Don Quixote warring on the world in behalf of Dulcinea, George Emerson doing in Cecil Vyse over Lucy Honeychurch. Behind a variety of disguises, the form is much the same, it's only a matter of filling in the blanks. For centuries upon medieval centuries, knights were riding around Europe seeking out other knights upon whom to impress the extraordinary qualities of their ladies. Directly or indirectly, the heroes were all laying siege to Castle Disdain, and the innermost keep of that castle was the mind of the fair one herself.

That image answered originally to a social situation: the chatelaine to whom courtly poems were written was commonly of higher rank than the poets who wrote; inevitably then a queen ruled over the imaginary courts of love, since she could be identified simultaneously with the queen of heaven and the local dispenser of patronage. (And wasn't that a lucky circumstance for Edmund Spenser, whose Gloriana could be similarly polyvalent. Had the throne been occupied by a male, the great poem might have been named *The Fairy King*, with queer consequences for an identification with James I.) But the fact that a lady was simultaneously the ultimate prize and the supreme obstacle of the search also corresponded to something deep in the psychology of courtship. For a lady may on a given day find her most faithful and importunate suitor—troublesome. She may take a fancy, the day after, for a sturdy carter, a fresh-faced shepherd. She may very well decide that no men are worth her care—none, not the best. She may think her current suitor a perfectly nice fellow, yet be made ill at the thought of the intimacies he is pressing on her. She may decide at the church door, at the altar, or six months later that there is something about him she cannot stand; she can hardly not be torn by conflicting emotions.

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preference; like the notion of the suitor performing "service" to his lady when she'd much rather be left alone, it's a convention.

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Perhaps, as the common vocabulary of sexual relation implies—words like conquest, possession, pursuit, capture, surrender, and the rest—marriage in prehistoric times began with an act of male subjugation, a Sabine rape. At all events, some vestiges of that psychology seem to remain, as in the girl who fights, even in the act of sex she has initiated, against her lover. She bites, scratches, curses, reviles the man who is "taking" her. Montaigne knows about such girls; he cites the courtesan Flora from Plutarch and some verses from Lucretius (II, 15), but could doubtless have found examples closer to home—so to speak. Indeed, if his mind had been slanted that way (for while he delights in seeing that animals are almost capable of human insight, we rejoice in the contrary view that humans shelter many animal instincts), he could have recognized a prototype of human love-hate feelings in a couple of his domestic cats in heat. Whether their cries are of desire or fear, of pain or delight, cannot be told; even as they copulate, they seem to be snarling and snatching and trying to get away. An experienced tomcat can be recognized by his tattered ears and scarred features. Some of these wounds may be the work of rivals, but others were no doubt created by his—so to speak—wives; they are the honorable scars of erotic warfare.

What goes on in the minds of these creatures, or of the even more ferocious weasels, there's no knowing, but I doubt that the female is thinking, "I must test this fellow to the limit, to make sure that my kittens have a tough and resourceful sire." No doubt she wants him to subdue her, to penetrate her, to give her a brood that will help carry on the species, but she doesn't act or sound as if that sort of thing was on her mind. If her ferocious yowls, scratchings, and bitings are any evidence, she fears and resents the male even as she desires him. His "conquest" of her really is a defeat; and in the human species too, when the woman "surrenders," she gives up not only her body but her power over her lover. When he is sated, he doesn't want any more for a time, and she has lost her power base as an object of desire. No wonder women used to be trained to "hold out" as long as possible, and in the last stages of a "siege" sometimes acted like spitfires. They really wanted and they really didn't want to be "taken"; and the more passionate their resistance, the more convulsive the impulse of the seducer-type

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male to overcome it. It is Mme. de Tourvel's profound, lifelong religious convictions that stir in the Vicomte de Valmont the implacable determination to surmount them. He must destroy her in the intimate theater, not of the boudoir, but of her conscience—destroy her, fully conscious and aware that she is doomed, destroy her and leave nothing behind. He can do so only because she does and does not want to be taken.

Montaigne knows a good deal about the fascination of what's difficult; he even applies it briefly to the technique of sexual fascination, but he's not basically interested in it except as a passing maneuver. The notion of obsessive longing is unwelcome if not altogether strange to him. Neither does he have much interest in jealousy; in III, 5 he says explicitly that it is not his weakness. Far from exaggerating it, he hardly recognizes its force in himself. Biographical commentary has tried hard to remedy the deficiency by supplying circumstantial evidence that he *ought* to have been jealous; but it won't wash. He says he wasn't jealous and all the evidence indicates that he wasn't. Perhaps we can leave it at that.

He does not contemplate the possibility—yet another cliché of our modern criticism—that the passion of A (let us call him the lover) for C (the mistress) is largely due to her being, actually or potentially, the possession of B (the rival or husband). The triangulation of desire occurs to him hardly at all, neither from the lover's point of view nor the husband's. No more does he have any sense that erotic conquest may be a form of social climbing—that the desire for the mistress may be just an obscure sense that there's room at the top. Neither does he dwell on the innocence/experience contrast, and he has little or nothing to say about sexual guilt. Adultery was always good for a laugh in his day, witness the success of the *Decameron*, the *Heptameron*, and the several volumes of Rabelais, all of which he enjoyed reading, but did not in his *Essais* try to emulate. The world being the world, as defined by men like Brantôme and women like Marguerite de Valois, Montaigne must have known plenty of racy stories and busy-bedroom jokes, such as even Erasmus in his *Colloquies* did not altogether disdain. Montaigne does not completely excise them either; but he does not indulge them. Like theological argument, straight bawdy was outside

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the tonal range of his normal discourse. It's hard to think both avoidances weren't deliberate.

Without describing anything in detail, he thinks, in the illicit-sex line, of a fleeting arrangement of assignations and furtive rendezvous—a clandestine affair, in which there's some danger of getting "caught" but no appreciable chance of permanent involvement or permanent anything. It is sexual contact without contract or commitment—raw, temporary desire. Implicit is the assumption that the woman is already married, because if she were not, and got pregnant, the consequences for everyone would have been too painful. The husband is needed as a screen; and at a time when almost all marriages were arranged, while a considerable measure of liberty was allowed both partners after marriage, husbands may not have been surprised even if not particularly pleased at their role. Montaigne is almost entirely free of the cuckoo syndrome.

About other forms of illicit sex he says little. He inspected the famous courtesans of Venice, but didn't patronize them or any other prostitutes—at least so far as silence on the subject implies abstention. Servant girls and peasant girls may have been his for the taking; he was, after all, a gentleman, and in the sixteenth century that, with a bit of money, covered a multitude of sins. But he says nothing about women of the easy classes at home or elsewhere—except, perhaps, for the purely hypothetical housemaid who initiated him (III, 13). By his time the old medieval fantasy that bulks so large in the *Decameron*, of seducing a nun and thus imaginatively cuckolding Christ, had faded from prominence; so far as we know, Montaigne rarely thought of nuns at all, and never as sexual objects. The playmates of his youth—presumably girls he met at Paris or while attending the parlement—were, from what he says, not far from his own class or at least not without prospects of their own. As he never committed himself to "resveries" about them, i.e., feelings that we might call "romantic," so he parted from them on good terms, giving them practical advice about their futures. None of these are instances of forbidden fruit looking particularly attractive; rather, the girls were nothing more than diversions for him, as he was for them. In this matter, to be sure, we have only his say-so.

With this, Montaigne's discussion of sexual allurement

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through withdrawal and difficulty is substantially complete. It might have taken on a new dimension had he considered the story of Owen Tudor and Catherine de Valois (he the son of a Welsh outlaw, she the young and beautiful widow of Henry V). How they fell in love and despite intransigent official opposition managed to produce five illegitimate children, one the father of the future king of England, Henry VII, might have given new meaning to that phrase, "the fascination of what's difficult." But there's no rewriting the *Essais*. Rather, Montaigne turns the argument of II, 15 in two distinct, unlikely directions. First he proposes that compulsion never produces such lasting effects as persuasion, and illustrates the point from the security of Roman marriages despite the ready availability of divorce. And then, moving away from sexual mores entirely, he argues that formidable defenses of anything, whether chastity or property, merely invite assault. The instance is his own open house at Montaigne, never properly fortified and for that reason never strongly assailed, even in the turmoil of a civil war.

How seriously he takes these divagations it's not easy to be sure. The story about Roman marriages, as it points airily at many social classes and units existing over a period of several thousand years, is equally hard to endorse or refute. In the cities and great commercial centers of the empire, life was different in almost all respects from life in the open fields or provincial towns. Saint Augustine was a Roman, so was Heliogabalus. The historians and satirists, whose focus is naturally on the upper levels of the greatest cosmopolis, give us a picture of Roman marriages so open (at times) that one would hardly know if they existed or not. Various persuasives to marriage were written and promulgated about the time of Augustus; they would hardly have been called for if the institution had been as free of problems as Montaigne represents it.

As for the other twist, it's a charming notion that by pulling down fences and throwing open doors one will allay the greedy passions and appetitive instincts of mankind at large. Experience is rather against it. Among other reasons, Montaigne's house stood safe because its master was known to be an intimate friend of famous and powerful people. In this concluding section of II, 15, Montaigne was wise to shift from talking about sex to talking about property—else he might have found

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himself arguing that if women would offer no resistance at all, they would never get raped. There is an exemplary young lady in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, who, when assaulted by a ruffian, "would infallibly have been raped had she not, by a timely compliance, prevented him."

Illicit is more fun than licit sex, Montaigne thinks, and not only because of the added tingle of secrecy, the exuberant presence of danger. He thinks one can indulge in more imaginative sex-play without fear of stirring up the seething caldron of passion that, he supposes, lies latent in every woman. A temporary mistress is entitled to all the fun one can give her. (Without oppressing the reader with evidence, he assumes all women get more pleasure out of sex than any men.) But a wife, with whom one has to live for a long time, must be treated with austerity and reserve lest one rouse the lustful tigress within her. She has been chosen on the basis of prudential considerations, with the advice of wise friends and mature relatives; and besides, property is involved. Nothing must be done for reasons of passion or impulse. So Montaigne wags his head wisely, and assures us that most of the failed marriages he has known began as love matches. This is not wholly impossible. At a time when arranged marriages were the rule, and most members of the extended family took part in the decision, marriage for love was an extreme step, taken generally under pressure of violent feelings. Such heightened expectations might very well lead to bitter disillusion. On the other hand, it seems almost inhumanly prudent to enter on the major erotic experience of one's life in the spirit of a man buying a yoke of well-matched oxen. What Montaigne displays here is an old man's cold-blooded wisdom. He himself was never, so far as we know, one to act in the flush of hot-blooded passion; and it's possible a lot of his fears about rousing the insatiable sexual appetites of women came from reading monkish books. Questioned closely on the matter, he would hardly have said his wife, his sisters, the Comtesse Gurson, or Mme. d'Estissac were overflowing vessels of lust. Perhaps once or twice in his life he had been lucky enough to encounter an overflowing vessel of lust; but that such was the character of women in general was no more likely then than it is now.

Men's fantastic fears about the seductive/destructive powers

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of women would fill several very large volumes, and Montaigne was not untouched by them. But his basic common sense kept these nightmares of being devoured or mutilated by voracious females well below the surface of his mind.[2] If he knew it, or thought about it at all, he must have smiled at the old superstition that every act of sex shortens a man's life by a day. Thinking of himself as a man entitled to live the full life of a man, he frankly and explicitly recognized sexual activity as part of that life. And he was never tainted with that active puritan appetite for moral discomfort that one can sense—differently expressed, of course—in Daniel Defoe and Blaise Pascal. More snugly than most, he dwelt in the body and the satisfactions of the body. Yet he never quite overcame those troubling images of the insatiable woman—who, in real life is simply the woman who asks more than her sexual partner can, at the moment, deliver. About his own capacities in bed Montaigne wavers, like most men, between the complacent and the uneasy; no doubt this is why he tends to define a sexual experience as a challenge, a test. How well can he perform? It is a question far more exciting in its implications than any aspect of the partner's person. Indeed, for the man who latently regards sex as a test, the partner and her feelings may hardly exist at all; he is out to satisfy his standards, maybe even surpass his personal best.

Like most men who write in any degree openly about sex, Montaigne has enjoyed for years the reputation of a "dirty" author; what people have in mind when they relax into that lazy-boy formula is a few passages describing an old man's memory, glorious but patchy, of his lusty youth. Naturally, the most vivid moments of his erotic calendar are veiled by discretion; but none of the women he had to deal with in actual daily life seem to have left a deep impression on him. About his

[2] In the mid- and late-nineteenth century these fantasies, taking distinctive form as the Salome, or "His Head on a Platter" syndrome, began to assert themselves in fiction, drama, music, and the plastic arts. A precursor was Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, in which Julien Sorel serves a perfectly deliberate authorial purpose, playing John the Baptist to Mathilde de la Mole's Salome. Later contributors to the mode include Mallarmé, Oscar Wilde, Gustave Moreau, Richard Strauss and Aubrey Beardsley, to name only the most notable. No doubt there were many others; since Mario Praz's survey of the area, more than fifty years ago, not much work has (to my knowledge) been done on it. It's to be suspected that the psycho-social causes of the vogue will prove at least as interesting as the works of art in which they flowered.

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mother's entire existence he was startlingly reticent; it is only through the accidental survival of some legal documents that we surmise there were difficulties over the paternal estate, perhaps some later troubles over Montaigne's slack housekeeping. On the evidence, Montaigne's relations with his wife, though kindly enough, were never warm; given the *Essais* as written, he may have been confident she would never read them, or indifferent to her feelings if she did. He seems to have been most at home in an avuncular relation, not only with his mistresses and ex-mistresses, but with mature friends like Madame d'Estissac, political contacts like "la belle Corisande" (Henry IV's playmate), and his literary admirer, over the last four years of his life, Mlle. de Gournay. His most famous erotic essay (III, 5) was written well after his retirement from an active role in the scrimmage, and occasionally it strikes a plaintive and querulous note of which, one suspects, young and vigorous Montaigne would have been ashamed. What can he mean by proposing Eros as therapy for the languors and melancholies of chilly old age? Surely it's a better spirit, and one more worthy of Montaigne, which leads him to write a moment later, "If they can be kind to us only out of pity, I'd much rather not live at all than subsist on charity" (III, 5, *ad finem*).

I'm not one of those who think it's a mortal insult to consider a woman as sex-object (nor am I shy about admitting I wish more of them had looked at me in that golden light), but from a modern perspective Montaigne seems pretty narrowly focussed on that function of the sex. It's less his positive enthusiasm for hanky-panky that impresses me than the lack of any interest at all in woman's other potentialities. The essay on the education of children (I, 26), apart from a single dismissive phrase, devotes not a single word to the education of girls. Addressing the pregnant Comtesse Gurson, his kinswoman, Montaigne assures her that she is too "genereuse" to have as her first child anything but a boy. It is an odd bit of confidence in a man who had begotten five consecutive girls (out of an ultimate total of six); and the adjective "genereuse" is curious too. Probably it means something like high-spirited or noble-souled; certainly it casts a shadow on the essayist's own wife, whose deficiencies of spirit, he implies, are the real reason for his lack of male heirs. In any case, having satisfied himself that

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the prospective child will certainly be of the favored sex, he feels entitled to say nothing at all for the rest of the essay about the education of girls—if indeed they are to have any education. Elsewhere a curt sentence in the middle of III, 5 dismisses the matter as of no interest to him. He takes no part, he says, in the education of his daughter because that's the proper concern of women and to them he leaves it.

If Erasmus and More, writing well before him, had not been such outspoken advocates of education for women, Montaigne might well appear less shabby and evasive in his treatment of the subject. In certain moods he was perfectly capable of recognizing that women may have intellects as acute and insightful as those of men; but when confronting directly the problem of what to do about it, he tended (like some other men in the same situation) to shuffle it out of mind. None of the actual women with whom in real life he had to deal were excellent in the pathetic-heroic way he celebrates in II, 35: they did not, like so many sacrificial sheep, commit suicide on their husbands' tombs. In fact, Françoise de la Chassaigne de Montaigne survived her husband by nearly thirty-five years. For whatever reason, and it may well have been that they were sharp of tongue or acid of disposition, Montaigne's present women were for him creatures to be approached cautiously and given their own space. Once he ventured to read aloud to Mme. de Duras his essay on the resemblance of children to their fathers (II, 37). It is his most vitriolic and outspoken attack on the medical profession, and he may well have written it in the first period of shock after discovering that he was afflicted with those incurable kidney stones which ultimately led to his death. However that may have been, Mme. de Duras was a person of authority in a family of many distinguished soldiers. She had had some experience of doctors and medicine, and it seems very evident from the letter to her that Montaigne appended to his essay that she disagreed with it flatly and completely. With or without formal education, Mme. de Duras was all that Montaigne could handle.

Within his own household he was of course master; what he said went, and what other people said—but we cannot make out that they ever said very much. Amid all the personal details with which his essays are crammed, there is not a single

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reminiscence of a conversation with his wife, not a word of her speaking, hardly an action of her doing. The placing of his library and study atop a tower apart from the rest of the household (with sleeping quarters for nights when he chose to be alone) tells its own story. By the terms of his own class and the mores of his time, Montaigne was far from a martinet; but he accepted the conditions of women's existence as they were given to him, and when buried in his books and his writing thought of his family no more than necessary. Much of his life was devoted to inner concentration protected by outer indifference.

Docility, silence, and abstinence were in fact dominant themes of female education in the sixteenth century; and Montaigne may have done less harm by steering clear than by getting—as we say—involved. In an age of complacent chauvinism, he achieved something by being an uneasy chauvinist. Yet, as often happens with Montaigne, when a formula comes out cut and dried, something important turns out to be missing. A key to the missing element is the admission, early in III, 5, that Montaigne hopes with his essay to gain entrée for his book into the boudoirs of the ladies. Appealing to a general public, or to the men who keep their books in the library, is all very well; and indeed it's perceptible that the first *Essais* are much more concerned than the later ones with matters of strategy and tactics, examples taken from military history and the records of public diplomacy. But with the essay on some verses of Virgil (which is in fact entirely about sex), he hopes to be admitted to a more tender and intimate commerce, a licit/illicit relation. It will be licit because it will be only his book that enters the lady's sanctum; it will be illicit because there is no real difference between Montaigne and his book; whoever touches one touches the other.

For certain temperaments or at certain stages of life it seems to be frequent enough that talking about sex and sharing verbal intimacies serves some men as a sufficient substitute for genital activity. Even in our permissive society there are women who make a living by talking dirty over the telephone—prostitutes, you might say, of the ear. Whether it is a way of arousing lust or letting it off needn't be decided here. It's an old procedure, and Montaigne stands near the early stages of it, but for him, as

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for those who follow, the exciting thing is privacy, a narrow sharing amid a general exclusion.

Rabelais can stand for the world of masculine sexuality, a world loud with guffaws and farts and coarse jokes about cuckoldry, populated by poxy topers wearing enormous codpieces and eager to fall on any barroom slut who will receive them. Quieter Montaigne wants to share the contents of his mind, down to the thick sludge at the bottom of it, with women sophisticated enough to be intrigued not shocked, amused not offended. He wrote, I think, in the rather generous spirit of an English prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, who liked to talk bawdy at table because, he said, it was one topic to which everyone could contribute. The sexist part of Montaigne's mind thought sex would attract women readers because it was the only subject of which they were capable and to which they were drawn by instinct and training. Sex if not love was their *métier*. On the other hand, he had neither the taste nor the temper to write analytic allegorical romances such as would shortly culminate in Mme. de Scudery's infinitely extensible *pays du tendre*. Between these two fields of erotic discourse, the coarse and the spiritual, Montaigne pitched his modest, even intimate, tent. Like writing in general, but with a special sense of dubious escapade, writing to women about sex from a man's point of view gave him a sense of release, not unlike catharsis.[3] It was an act of that freedom about which he cared so deeply. Georges Brassens, the "pornographe du phonographe," has put it very strikingly:

[3] In the sentence I have placed before this essay by way of epigraph, the sense of "mes pieces" has been taken, perhaps too easily, as the parts of the body, rather than the parts of Montaigne's book. It is trite and vulgar that the penis "makes a man" of one; it is wholly untrue that the little finger and the vermiform appendix do so equally. Montaigne generally uses the word *piece* to refer to separate elements of an assembled whole. His essays are *pieces* of his book (I, 28), he speaks of *pieces* of a machine (II, 12), says Plutarch's comparisons are the best *piece* of his book (II, 32), and that the knowledge he wants is treated by Plutarch and Seneca *à pieces décousus* (II, 10). *Partie* is generally the word for parts of the body, i.e. *parties du corps* (II, 6 and 37), *parties vitales* (II, 12), *parties genitales* (II, 30 and III, 11), and *parties moins honnestes* (III, 5). In context either reading of the sentence would fit—an allusion to the penis going with earlier quotations from the *Priapeia*, allusion to the essays going with the later paragraph about full and intimate self-representation. I think he's saying it's the writings that get him invited inside ladies' boudoirs that make a man of him more than the others that are read in public.

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Autrefois quand j'étais marmot
J'avais la phobie des gros mots
Et si j'pensais merde tout bas
Je ne le disais pas.
Mais
Aujourd'hui que mon gagne-pain
C'est de parler comme un turlupin
Je n'pense plus merde pardi
Mais je le dis.

"Gros mots" are not in fact Montaigne's obsession; he has few or no scatological hangups, and rather circumlocutes than dwells upon the physiological aspects of sex. (I, 21 includes the broadest and funniest piece of writing in Montaigne, his speech in the person of a lawyer representing his penis, charged with mutinous and insubordinate conduct.) Mostly it's the ill-defined area where moral rules and natural instincts come into conflict that he likes to talk about; perhaps the most impressive part of his discourse is his skill at avoiding categorical and peremptory judgments. Opportunity counts for much in love, he says; rather, for more, and even for most of all. And opportunity is nothing but a catchall word for an indefinite accumulation of intangibles. As if to blur even further the very possibility of calculation, he introduces as important elements of erotic attraction indefinable and complex feelings, such as had not often, and perhaps had not ever, been counted among the bonding agents of love partners. "I approve a certain childishness in the lover, a touch of timidity, of docility," he writes; so much for the brassy, overweening peacock-male. Something like *mauvaise honte* on the part of the lover would correspond with something like *pudeur* on the part of the mistress; our current buzz word for the same qualities is "sensitivity."

These are the qualities that Montaigne sees as called for by the courtship-and-pursuit situation, and the most notable thing about them is how vague and indefinite they are. Everything depends on how you feel, how you make other people feel, on reciprocal implications. Surely with mocking intent, Montaigne lists nearly dozens of ancient books providing worldly wisdom on the subject of love and marriage; as he doesn't bother to transcribe any of their precepts, it's apparent that he thinks

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them altogether useless. Everything in love depends, in a word, on improvisation. Over the past four hundred years I suspect not much has changed in the pairing-off process, except superficially. In permanent associations (whether labelled "marriages" or not), I suspect that what we call "commitment" and Montaigne knew as "loyalty" still retains some place; combining that stability with the precarious pleasures of the hunt and catch situation is still one of the problems.

But the two-way division that Montaigne accepts between hectic love *par amour* and staid, tepid matrimony is far too stiff and mechanical to fit the variety of modern feelings; one can only hope that it didn't satisfy Montaigne either. For over the centuries no word has taken on more colors and implications than "love," in which we are now prepared to recognize components, shapes, disguises, and degrees of affinity that can hardly be charted on the formal charts. Toward the end of his life Montaigne found a new relation of a third kind with his "fille d'alliance," Mlle. de Gournay, who was neither wife, mistress, nor daughter, though possibly dearer than any of the above.

The fact is that Montaigne is not much of a guide through the wilder ways of passion. A householder, a sceptic, and a man whose life work was introspection, he did not have the temperament of a fool for love. He says so himself, that he enjoyed his several affairs but never lost his head in the course of them nor allowed his ladies to do so. "I took my pleasure but never forgot myself; whatever bit of sense and discretion nature has given me I held in reserve for their service and mine; a little emotion but no daydreaming (*resverie*)" (III, 5). Limited liability, in other words. It's not an imprudent attitude, but is prudence always the central value in love? How different this summary would sound in the mouth of a woman! "I had my fun, but never lost sight of . . ." Of what? Of the main chance? Of the social rules that permit you to get away with just so much, provided you observe certain decorums and don't get caught violating others? To use Montaigne's metaphor, this is playing the market for all it's worth, but it comes rather under the heading of trade than love. It is a very masculine bit of self-stroking to say we expect more generous dealing in a woman. But doesn't, in

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either sex, all this holding back, all this self-protection, all this calculation behind the face of love, show as cold and egotistical?

The modern novel has made a great deal of the anxious lover's failure, even in the highest ecstasies of physical intimacy, to know the soul and be united with the inner spirit of the mistress. Marcel, striving to capture the elusive spirit of Albertine, recapitulates the struggle of Swann to know the perfectly available yet infinitely withdrawn Odette. Following in their footsteps, the haunted huntsman Humbert Humbert enthusiastically "possesses" his nymphet, but only physically; he cannot touch her mind or her heart such as they are. Precisely so, Justine, an enigma even to herself, remains beyond reach of her husband and any of her lovers in Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. An inner check like that which baffles these various lovers Montaigne describes, not without complacency, in himself. It is much less mysterious but no less impenetrable than any of these interior feminine veils. Perhaps it is no more than the check of common sense of a weather eye to social prudence; it may have resulted from nothing more principled than a deficiency of sexual appetite. Its effect, in any event, was decisive. The ladies who sensed that they were no more than a passing diversion for Montaigne evidently took care not to let him become more than a passing diversion for them. In the market of love, it's by no means uncommon to find the supply accommodating itself very quickly to the demand. A lover who will not give much can be pretty sure of not getting much.

Montaigne's caution in dealing with mistresses and his downright austerity in recognizing his wife and sole surviving daughter as persons imply that he may not have been all that interested in the sex; and indeed, wherever possible, he likes to interpose a screen of language. The verses of Virgil and Lucretius stir him to more lyrical appreciations than any identifiable creature of flesh and blood. To the vigor and expressiveness of strong poetic lines he reacts almost physically. Perhaps by no coincidence he finds the goddesses more titillating in a state of partial undress than if they were altogether nude. As fantasms in Latin poems more than a thousand years old, from another sphere, under a different dispensation, appealing to his imagination not his senses, they are just about

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a proper remove. But of course he was an old man sitting in a library when he wrote—a burning young Catullus he was not.

As it's now traditional to say, the closest Montaigne ever came to love in the robust personal sense—"resverie" and all—was in his relation to Etienne de la Boëtie. One need only recall his tone when writing of his friend—his insistence on the identity of their two souls, the intimate chords of sympathy that bound them in life, the crushing melancholy that came over him after his friend's death—and then compare the caution and reserve he brings to an account of his sexual affairs. It is hard, in our climate of opinion, to state the degree of their attachment without appearing to overstate it. They were not homosexual lovers, they were devoted and mutually admiring friends who provided one another with mental support, political advice, personal understanding. Having nothing but persiflage to exchange with women, they poured more of their souls into this friendship than young men commonly do nowadays. It was their only chance. Apart from the six years in which he knew La Boëtie, Montaigne never had a real friend or intellectual companion. La Boëtie was the only true love of his life—as he demonstrated when he deliberately tried to fall in love with a girl, after his friend's death, by way of distraction (III, 4).

In any talk about the relation between the sexes we're likely to underestimate the cultural codes that widen or narrow, but always define, the grand difference. In the fervid (or chilly?) days of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when men and women alike performed heavy manual labor, wore a shapeless uniform of baggy pants and quilted jacket, cut their hair with a rice bowl, and addressed each other as "Comrade," the division must have seemed minimal. By contrast, the sheer stockings, filmy lingerie, high-heeled shoes, elaborate makeup, and ornate hairdos of our modern dames make them often appear another species entirely. (I'm making a social observation here, not in any sense a value judgment.) Montaigne's society made similar or even greater distinctions between the sexes, above all in the upper classes. Young ladies got much less education, and what they got was indoctrination focussed closely on the domestic virtues, above all, chastity. Women wore very different clothing than men, garments that had the effect, if not the purpose, of restricting their activity and limiting their move-

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ments. Since the idea of women working for a living was confined to the peasantry, most women of the upper classes anticipated marriage, childbearing, and domestic chores as their exclusive future. After marriage especially, but before it as well, there must have been a degree of promiscuity—more tolerated among men than among women, but obviously requiring a degree of participation by both sexes. Men prided themselves, often loudly and explicitly, on their sexual potency, and tried to demonstrate it liberally. The codpiece, about which Montaigne complained that it gave women exaggerated expectations of the tool it concealed, was a barbaric form of sexual strutting. Dances, poems, songs, stories, barnyard jokes, and street graffiti all heightened the intensity of the sexual game, a game played with all the more zest because the prize was forbidden fruit. Between them, society and the church conspired to keep women different, distant, and desirable.

By contrast, modern life is a coed dorm. For while our mores have diminished the intensity of the sex game by making the prizes easier and the penalties negligible, they have multiplied its uncertainties and expanded its presence in everyday life to a degree hitherto unknown. To sell an automobile the manufacturer makes implicit sexual promises; to read the daily newspaper one has to snake one's way through ads featuring semi-nude girls. The allure of sex is spread far beyond daytime soap operas and porno publications. Life on a police force, in a law firm, or as an international spy is represented as an unbroken sequence of sexual adventures. Women are represented as freely accessible, without obstacles to be overcome or consequences to be endured, because pregnancy can be avoided or cancelled. Yet at the same time, in the real world, women are more and more independent of men and reluctant to be tied down to them. They are increasingly capable of working and gaining from their work not just a wage but power and authority. There's a big area of *Sturm und Drang* here where roles collide and big choices with long-range consequences for the individual have to be made. But the trend of things seems very clear overall; women are moving not only into the work place but into the traditionally masculine authority structure. With men it seems to be going the other way; few of them perform anymore the sort of dangerous and adven-

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turous task that used to justify their image as hunters, providers, protectors and thus supreme authorities. In the business of daily life men and women work everywhere side by side; increasingly it's an accepted social circumstance that women may hold posts of authority over men. Stepping into an unfamiliar office, Montaigne would never have had to adjust to the fact that the woman at the big desk was really the president, the young man in the background her secretary.

No more did he have to adjust to the several complications of sexual ambiguity. Homosexuality, which Montaigne knew about from reading the dialogues of Plato, bothered him, as it did most of his contemporaries; Leviticus XVIII, 22 is pretty explicit in prohibiting it. But he did not discuss the matter at length, and probably assumed (against better knowledge) that it was an aberration that disappeared with the coming of Christianity, or should have done. The venereal diseases were common topics of discussion in the sixteenth century, but not in Montaigne's essays; lesbianism was not unknown, but he didn't recognize its existence. A lot of the different code-conflicts that we consider topics of common discussion and personal decision Montaigne disposes of by simply not thinking of them. In the matter of sex his world is strikingly bilateral; ours is modelled, rather, on three-dimensional tick-tack-toe.

The difference is less, perhaps, in what's actually being done than in what's permissible, what is free to be done without anybody caring. One used to be born to a sexual identity from which flowed an intricate sequence of conventions and compulsions that directed and controlled one's desires. No doubt so much conformity forced unwelcome options on some people; but a wide range of undirected individual choices can very well result in overloading the circuits and stifling real options under a cloud of exotic possibilities. The search for permanent ecstasy right around the corner has landed some people in odd corners indeed.

It's a virtuoso feat to fill a human life entirely with sexual relations; perhaps it's been done, but rarely and only by a special talent. Most men and women seem ready to cut back on a purely copulative existence in order to make room for some other sustaining activity. The new status of women makes it easier than ever for them to join with men in pursuing topics of

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common interest, with the great difference firmly on the shelf. That topic of how people work together is one that Montaigne doesn't much discuss; both as landowner and writer, he lived to himself, and only in his political activities (about which discretion kept him from saying much) did he work on terms of intimacy with his relative equals. The idea of discussing a book with a woman does not seem to have crossed his mind till he encountered, in the last years of his life, Mlle. de Gournay. But then he doesn't seem like the sort of man who would talk over things—things political or cultural or whatever—with his neighbors, regardless of sex. Not one of them is mentioned in the *Essais.*

As a child of his age, Montaigne sometimes lets drop a passing comment about the female sex in general that raises the hair on one's enlightened head. But these generalizations have to be viewed askance. Very often they are ideological bad habits, bits of desiccated public commonplace repeated without a lot of conviction. From society at large Montaigne picked up a good many formulas of conservative conviction, to which his life and his judgment of particular circumstances give the lie. He has to be read in his constant practice and in his indirections, avoidances, and omissions as well. It was no small feat to write as much as he did about sex without mentioning more than glancingly the teachings of the Church or the anti-feminist vituperations of the monks. His undertone of sympathy with women forced to live under an alien law implies more imaginative warmth than one will find in any other writer of the age, and the intimate, playful quality of his prose is itself an act of gracious invitation, a true and equal sharing.

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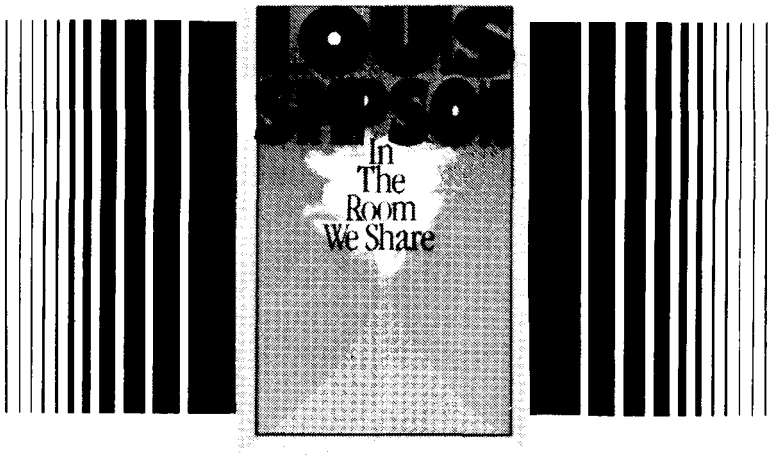

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Associate

1

I would read until I was sure,
then type a report.
When it came back from J. J.
I'd write the letter of rejection.

"Don't go in for criticism,"
he said. "It gets you in trouble.
Use the standard form: 'We regret
that due to the limitations of our budget
et cetera et cetera.' "

One day he called me in.
From now on I wasn't just a reader
I was to be an associate,
working with authors on their books.
The rise in status, unfortunately,
didn't carry a raise in pay,
due to the limitations
of our budget et cetera.

2

J. J. on the intercom . . .
she was with him now,
would I come right away.

The eyes she turned towards me
were like ice. "I want everything
put back just the way it was,"
she wrote to J. J.

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"I haven't read my Joyce for nothing."

"Here's the culprit now," he said.
Turning to me . . . "Peter,
I know that you think as highly
of *Vows* as I do. It has greatness,
wouldn't you say? Sweep and vision?"

I had a vision of my paycheck
fading. I said yes.

Then he and she
discussed the vanishing of greatness.
This morning's *New York Times*
carried G. B. Shaw's obituary.
"There's no one left," she sighed.

He placed a hand over hers.
"I don't agree. I may be just an optimist,
but when I read the opening pages
of *Vows*, I said to myself, J. J.,
this is it . . . what I've been hoping for."

Later, when she had left,
he spoke to me . . . as a friend.
Did I realize that all the while
I was with them I never once smiled?
It isn't enough to like to read,
you have to like people. Putting a hand
on my shoulder . . . "Stay loose."
A phrase from baseball . . . He liked the Yanks
but still rooted for Cincinnati.

"Smile," he said. I said that I would try.

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3

I poured myself a double,
then made supper. The oven,
kitchen sink, and closet
took up one whole wall.
The rest of the room was quite large.

Sometimes I ate out . . . with Gallagher.
Mike came to work at Albion House
the year after me. He too was divorced.
Now he was having an affair
with the wife of a fashion photographer.

He had a favorite eating place,
a diner on Third Avenue.
He said, "They make a very tasty steak."

The word "tasty" coming from Mike
with his build of an ex-football-player,
sticks in my mind. I can see his face,
his jaw muscles working . . .
and the diner. There's jazz on the jukebox,
featuring Bix Beiderbecke.

4

New York wasn't the main office . . .
that was in Indiana.
We went there to present our books
to the salesmen, and pay our respects
to Mr. Sidney, the Old Man.

The town is a convention center.
Shriners, Knights of Pythias,
members of the American Legion,
fill the lobby and stand around
on the sidewalk.

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There are three now.
One of them is leaning on a stick
that is electrically wired.
A goodlooking woman comes by . . .
he touches her with it and she jumps
out of her skin. Now she is trying
to hit him with her handbag.
"Take it easy, boys," says the policeman.

Their wives come with them.
I rode down in the elevator
with three. Their hair was blue-rinsed
the color of laundry detergent.
One was carrying a roll
of toilet paper. "Here, young feller,"
she said, and held it out to me,
"have a crap game." And all three
went into a fit of laughter.

We gave our book presentations.
Then there was lunch.
After lunch, more presentations,
with the salesmen, whose party this was,
falling asleep.

We came together again
for dinner. Between the courses
one of the salesmen, named Finneran,
walked around and stood behind you
and made a remark that was supposed
to be funny. He did this with everyone,
I noticed, except the Old Man.

Then there were toasts . . . to our President,
Mr. Sidney. To the Vice-President
in Charge of Sales. To someone else
in charge of production.
Whereupon I rose to my feet.

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There are things you have said and done
that haunt you for the rest of your life.
I hear myself making a speech,
saying that we should be grateful
to J. J., for being such a fine editor.

I see the eyes of the Old Man
glaring from the head of the table.
Alice, our publicity woman,
staring at me with wide eyes.
J. J. looking down at his plate . . .

I sit down again, knowing
what a fool I've made of myself.
"Who does he think he is?" says the voice
of Finneran, loud and clear.

5

I met Mike at Grand Central
and we took the train to Old Greenwich.

J. J. met us, the two boys with him.
The older boy seemed nervous.
He kept telling J. J.
to drive slowly and look out.

J. J. said there was a chore
he had to finish. Would we help.
I said that I would. Mike said
riding on the train had given him
a thirst.

When we got to the house
Mike retired to the living room
with a drink. I helped J. J.,
holding the boards while he hammered,
making a kennel.

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In the afternoon
some people came by. A woman
who ran an art gallery in Greenwich;
the lawyer who lived next door.
Betsy, J. J.'s wife, made hors d'oeuvres.
Mike and I took drink orders.

A woman who was "in theater"
talked about Judy Garland,
what a wonderful person she was
and how she was killed by drugs.
She ended saying, "We all failed her."

How did I fail Judy Garland,
I wondered, but did not say.
The remark hangs in the air
among other things that were said
that afternoon . . . not ideas
and sentences, but breaths of air
and sound waves, emanations.

*

It's two hours later
and people are arguing about
politics. . . . "That's how much you know!
Adlai Stevenson couldn't suck eggs."

"I've heard all I want,"
Betsy says, and makes for the door.

We hear her driving off
fast . . . then a squeal of brakes.
Luckily it isn't a child
she's run over, just the dog.

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6

There's a picture . . . like an electric chair.
You're to put your prospective mate
in the chair and pull a switch.
The pointer swings so many degrees
and you do some calculations.

You work out both your futures
from astrological signs.

Finally you ask, are the two of you
compatible?

I'm expecting an old lady
in tennis shoes. Instead
she's a rather attractive redhead,
if you like the girl next door,
with freckles, when she's thirty-five.

As I explain why "we regret,"
the elbow she has placed
on the desk starts to rap,
and I notice that she's trembling
all over, from head to toe.

"I hear," she says, "you were in San Francisco.
What did they tell you about me?"

Finally she leaves. Bernice,
the office manager's assistant,
who shares the same cubicle,
her desk facing mine, and doesn't miss a word,
puts a forefinger to her temple
and rotates it . . . the immemorial sign
that means, "This person is crazy."

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7

Walter the office manager
paces the floor continually.
The cubicle I sit in is enclosed
with frosted glass. I look up
and see, gliding above the line
of frosted glass, a pair of eyes,
watery and blue . . . in lenses
that make them look like oysters . . .
fixed on me with suspicion.
That's Walter. Am I working
or dreaming the time away?

One day, in a moment of exuberance,
I got into Walter's office
with a good review of one of our books
in the *Times*.

"That's not good," he says.
"Now the author will expect us
to advertise."

I return to my cubicle
and stand at the window
looking out. It isn't just writers
who are crazy.

We are on the twenty-third floor.
Two floors beneath there's a ledge
with heads . . . of gods and goddesses,
where they can't possibly be seen.

It isn't just the world of publishing
that's crazy. It's the world.

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8

Bettina

It's 900 pages long.
"Cut 300," says J. J.

Then I am to try my hand
at three chapters in the style
of the author, to bridge the gaps.

I make an astonishing discovery.
Since the characters aren't mine
all sorts of ideas occur to me.
I reel off words with the facility
of Dumas or Walter Scott.

I have Bettina's husband lose her
in a dice game. What were the games
they played in the thirteenth century?
That's the kind of thing that would take me
days. . . . To hell with it! I'll make one up.

Then I have her leave the gambler
for a Scotsman . . . a soldier of fortune.
There'll be the siege of a castle . . .
crossbows, catapults, boiling oil.

Sex no longer presents an obstacle.
Every few pages
I take the clothes off Bettina.
No sooner does she get them on
than I start taking them off.

"Well done," says J. J. "I knew you had it in you."

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9

He sits holding his manuscript
on his lap like a hurt child.
I hear my own voice far away.

Once, at the start of Fall,
I was driving from New England.
The leaves were turning red and orange,
the air was fresh and cool.

I saw a sign for a barn sale.
It was dark inside. After a while
as my eyes grew accustomed
I saw tables heaped with tools . . .
another with cups and saucers.
There were toys and souvenirs . . .
the glass ball that you shake
to make snowflakes swirl and fall.

A staircase led to a second floor
with furniture and, to one side,
bookcases, shelves of books . . .
joke books by Bennett Cerf
cheek by jowl with the Civil War.
A row of bestsellers
in the *Reader's Digest* shortened versions . . .
books that had once been praised
and now were, most of them, forgotten.
Who now reads Bulwer Lytton?
Van Wyck Brooks? Josephine Herbst?

And here's another writer.
What shall I say to him?
That life is far more wonderful
than anything we can write?

That's not what he wants to hear.
"But listen to me. Let me tell you,"
he would say, "about my life."

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RONALD DE FEO

What I'm All About

That morning I met Mrs. Somerville on the stairs. I was going up with the paper and she was coming down with a suitcase. As usual, she spoke to me at length. She's the only person in the house who speaks to me at length. But I don't feel privileged. From what I gather she's been speaking at length to nearly everyone since her husband died five years ago. Though she did get very personal once, saying that I reminded her of her and of people like her, except for my youth. "I don't quite understand," I said. According to her I seemed like someone who was widowed or divorced. "But I've never been married," I said. "It doesn't matter," she said, "it's there." "What's there?" "It's hard to put into words. It's a kind of grayness, dear. As if you've lost something." I didn't like her confident, knowing tone. I wanted to tell her that I hadn't lost one damn, bloody thing, that on the contrary I kept finding things, particularly annoying old eccentrics on staircases and in shops and on bus queues. But I restrained myself. I'm still the gentleman, after all is said and done.

"Can I help you?" I asked on the stairs that morning, just to show consideration. Though to be truthful, she did rather force the matter what with her painful grunting as she lugged the suitcase. "That would be lovely," she answered. So there I am nearly losing my footing under the weight of this bloody leather monster while she is leisurely descending with my newspaper which she graciously insisted on relieving me of. "Off on holiday?" I asked between my teeth as I struggled down. "Hardly," she said, "just off to visit my mum in Kent for a few days." I wondered why in that case she had to take half her flat with her. "Then again, I suppose it is sort of a holiday. I do rather look forward to it. The country, I mean." I stopped to rest on the landing. "You know, Mr. Cole," she continued, "the country would do you a world of good. You could use some

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freshening up, a bit of color. Perhaps you'd like to join me sometime. . . . We could take some lovely walks." She smiled up at me strangely. It was all fairly revolting.

Just my luck, I thought later on in my room as I flipped through the paper. The one woman in years who makes a pass at me and she's a heavily powdered cockatoo old enough to be my aunt. The more I thought about it, the more angrily I flipped, so much so that soon full pages were flying to the floor. Of late anger was getting the better of me. I was becoming known as an angry man. At work one day, the office boy, who still hasn't learned to judge the full extent of his bulk, knocked over a pile of folders on my desk. I cursed him so furiously that he nearly broke down. "You are becoming an angry man," Mrs. Tilsdale announced. "A very, very angry man." "Oh, why don't you piss off," I said, only supporting her point. It's not anger, though, I thought. It's confusion. I don't know what I'm supposed to be, I thought. Am I angry or mild mannered? A real sport or a bastard? Maybe I'm angry because I don't know if I want to be angry. I don't really know what I'm all about.

That morning I couldn't decide what to do with myself. The weather sounded promising—cloudy with sunny periods. I thought I might ring up my friend Arthur and meet him at the Cock and Bull for lunch. But lately even he was getting me angry, what with all his talk about his ex-wife who had just remarried. "She's killed me," he said, and actually shed tears in his ale. It was a sickening display. "She's killed me," he kept saying. "I thought she killed you a year and a half ago," I finally said, losing all patience, "so, you see, she can't kill you because you're dead already."

I took a walk instead, having no fixed destination. The weather was turning cooler and the leaves were beginning to fall, littering the paths in Russell Square. The leaves were still wet from the night rain and shone when the sun struck them. I notice things like that. There must be a bit of a romantic in me. I passed a lot of damp scholarly types with notebooks heading eagerly for the British Museum. I used to be faintly that way once upon a time, until I began wondering if stuffing your head with knowledge made any more sense than giving the damn thing a good rest.

I strolled a long way or so it seemed, perhaps because the

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weather changed several times. It was sunny in Bedford Square and on Tottenham Court Road, raining as I walked along Shaftesbury Avenue, and sunny again by the time I reached Trafalgar Square.

When I was on Charing Cross I suddenly remembered an odd little advertisement in the paper. It had been written by some harmless lunatic who reported that while he was in Foyles last Saturday morning at eleven o'clock or whatever, a beautiful brunette with a lovely smile and gemlike green eyes asked if he could recommend a good new thriller for a friend who was dying in hospital. The lunatic went on to report that the woman was the woman of his dreams, a goddess with whom he felt an instant rapport, and that he hoped she would ring him up at such and such a number to begin a lifetime of love and happiness. What rubbish, I thought. And yet when I came to Foyles, I found myself going inside. I'd been off books for a long while, so I wasn't really looking for a book. I didn't really know what I was really looking for. Perhaps I wanted to walk about the historic site where the beautiful brunette and the lovable lunatic had first met. Perhaps I wanted to see if there was anything the least bit romantic about Foyles. It had never struck me as such in the past. And as I roamed about it didn't strike me as such now—mostly a lot of pale men in raincoats reading dust jackets or bending over to read spines or moving from room to room in a pathetic booklover's trance. A brunette did pass by, but she had dull brown eyes and a homely face with a drooping lower lip. She had never been the stuff of my dreams.

It was in Trafalgar Square that I thought of what Mrs. Somerville had said about the country. I suppose it was all those pigeons that got me to thinking. First you think of birds, then birds in trees, then the trees themselves, then leaves and grass and nature and all that. The brain is a funny thing. You never know what to expect from it, where it will take you. This time it took me to the tube station.

I ended up in Hampstead, which I hadn't been to in ages and which I suppose I consider the country. At least it's more of the country than Piccadilly Circus or Lambeth, where I was a boy. I like the village feel to the place—the hilly streets, the little

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shops, the red brick, the white stucco, the ivy all about. With not much effort I could imagine myself back in the nineteenth century, leisurely strolling through town, known to everyone around me, a good citizen, a good friend, with an even disposition. You get lost in the city, lose yourself in a way. Here it felt different. I was taking pleasant shape, becoming a calm, amiable, sensitive soul. Yes, I felt different. Though I suppose deep down I knew that there was no bloody difference at all. A tube ride can only do so much.

I stopped in at John Keats's place. It's the kind of home I'd like to have some day. Cozy, tastefully done, though maybe a bit too charming for its own good, as if Keats had hired a decorator who specialized in dollhouses. But from the information cards placed all about, I gathered that Keats had the right idea about living—he loved young, made his mark young, and then dropped dead while he was still ahead. I got to thinking that I was getting on a bit now, still hadn't met the right woman, still hadn't made my mark, and the end still looked a long way off. It started to shower again so I waited out the spell in Keats's drawing room. It was all rather peaceful, listening to the rain tapping the leaves outside and watching some of them float down. Nonetheless, I cursed the weatherman. He had made me expect a partially bright day, had put me in that sort of mood, and now I had to settle for dreariness. Aside from dying young, that was another good thing about Keats's day—there were no weathermen to give you false hopes.

When the rain stopped, I roamed about town, along Flask Walk, Church Row, Frognal, and then headed up to the Heath. It was windy up there, and a boy was with his dad flying a kite over London sunk down in the valley below. I always wanted to fly a kite with my dad, but we never got around to it. We never got around to much of anything. He was always away at the printing plant. Always away printing and getting ink all over himself. My dad had a great respect for the printed word. So much respect that the man hardly talked. He'd come home filthy with ink and quiet as a monk. He'd eat his dinner in near silence. I'd say something and he might nod if the spirit moved him, and then go on eating. I'd look at his hands as he'd work his knife and fork and I'd notice the ink highlighting the cracks in the skin. No matter how much he washed, the ink remained.

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I'd think, You act like you're too important to speak, but what are you but a bloody laborer with a filthy job and permanently black hands. But his respect for the printed word knew no bounds. Maybe I should have communicated with him by typewritten letter or better still, with pitch-black filthy ink on paper.

I didn't want to go back to the city just yet, feeling that if I had to deal with the day's dreariness I was better off dealing with it here in the country. So buttoning my coat to the collar, I kept walking in the cold, past the Heath, and took the long road leading to Kenwood House, where I'd hear concerts out-of-doors on summer evenings long ago. Wet leaves were all along the ground, making a kind of soggy carpet. It's all rather picturesque, I said to myself, and for a moment, just a moment, wished that I had a companion to say that to, someone who might appreciate the comment, for whatever it was worth. But except for the occasional car squashing the leaves and splashing the occasional puddle, there wasn't a soul in sight. Even the Spaniard's Inn seemed dead when I passed it. I suddenly felt very odd, as if I were mad to be here. No one is doing this, I thought, because it's an absurd thing to do on a day like today. I quickened my pace, anxious to get out of the cold, anxious for any sort of company—even a guard at Kenwood would do. What is this all about, I wondered, this strange feeling, this fear of an empty street?

I was relieved when I reached the house, glad when the guard greeted me. I must have been trembling when I entered because he said, "Getting rather brisk out there is it, sir?" I moved through the rooms, pretending to admire the famous paintings on the walls—a Rembrandt here, a Gainsborough there—getting up close to them to study the paint, or whatever it was you got up close to a painting for. I don't know why, but I wanted to appear to the guard or to anyone else who might be about that I had come here with a purpose in mind. I lingered for a while by a painting by this Vermeer chap of a woman playing a guitar in a room filled with light. It was well done, I'll grant it that. But I wondered why the person she was smiling at wasn't in the picture, and what that smile was supposed to mean. She wasn't my type—too foreign and strange and

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long—but obviously she was someone else's. I imagine you had to be Dutch to get fully worked up about her.

I kept roaming, trying to look intense, interested, and not like someone who was feeling a bit embarrassed for being here at all. Walking down a marble hall I passed an elderly couple, in scarfs, jackets and knitted caps, huddled over a guidebook of some sort. I was somewhat grateful for their presence, though they looked German—rosy-cheeked, cold and nasty. I came to the library, which I remembered being in once before—all done up with columns and alcoves, gold work and fancy designs. I thought for a moment, This is what it's like to be rich, this is what it's like to make your mark.

The Germans were suddenly there in the library and they seemed interested in me as if I were one of the sights noted in their guidebook: turn right and you come to an insane Englishman out for the day. I didn't like being scrutinized, particularly by frankfurters like them, so I left the room, left the house itself. Outside, from the vast back lawn, the house looked bigger than it did from within, a great white mansion from another age. With heavy gray clouds drifting behind it, Kenwood was whiter than I ever remembered it, glowing like something out of a dream. Ah, there I go again, I thought, as an odd tingling ran through me, there I go again getting carried away.

Suddenly the wind blew up so hard that leaves were slapped against the house. Some of them slapped against me. I retreated to the old coach house at the side of the mansion which they had fashioned into a little restaurant. Over biscuits and tea, I gazed out the window. I thought about a summer night years ago when I had brought a girl to Kenwood for a concert under the stars. The wind was blowing then too, but it was warm and felt good on the skin, like fingers running ever so softly over you, your bare arms, your face, gently stroking your hair. A few times, I remembered, it lifted strands of her hair and brushed them against my cheek, and those little touches made me feel very close, and I put my arm more thoroughly around her waist and then slowly reached up and cupped her breast, there in the night. She allowed me to do that, didn't mind in the least, as she rested her head on my shoulder and whispered, "I like you."

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As I was thinking about all of this, trying to remember it correctly, if it was all true, I turned just for a moment away from the window and noticed out of the side of my eye that someone else was now sitting in the restaurant, only several tables from me. For a while, I pretended to be fascinated by the nothing outside. I then looked down at my tea and stirred it. As I stirred, I pretended to let my eyes idly stray from the cup over to the other tables.

She was, I observed on quick but repeated viewings, a young woman of average size, with short, rust-colored hair that seemed natural and cut in a fringe, or whatever, just above the eyebrows. She had pleasing cheekbones, a subtle, appealingly turned-up nose. She wore a black sweater and kept her wool scarf on. It was gray and gave a nice touch. There was something very exciting about her having her scarf on like that, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe it was the way she seemed half-dressed, that is half-dressed for the indoors and half-dressed for the out. Maybe it was the way part of the scarf hung down and rested on her nicely round breast. She also had an oval face, but not so much that you'd recognize the oval immediately. And she had, above all, these extraordinary eyes, oval too, large and dark and penetrating, as if they could take you in and sum you up at a glance, go immediately to the heart of what you were all about. What does she think I'm all about? I wondered. Because for a moment, just a moment, a split second there in the coach house, she looked me straight in the eye. And she smiled. Warmly. As if saying hello. Then she turned away and looked down at her tea. It was all very brief, the smile, the glance. But it was all very warm.

I couldn't quite believe what had happened. To have such a face, with such eyes, in all their ovalness, smile at you like that, with no provocation, out of the blue. It was amazing. I didn't know what to do. I should have smiled back, but before I could think of that she was already looking back down at her tea.

I realized that I was staring at her and I abruptly turned away. Several huge dark gray clouds were passing over us now and I expected a downpour at any moment, but nothing happened. Though I kept considering the clouds, I sneaked a look every now and then out of the corner of my eye at the

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woman at the table. Quick, fleeting, without even moving my head, an eyeball sort of thing, so she wouldn't take notice.

Maybe I should have been more open, more bold. Maybe I should have turned and stared directly at her, smiling the biggest smile I could manage. Maybe I should have turned my chair in her direction and admired her fully. Or maybe I should have just called out some bit of small talk in the form of a question: It certainly looks like rain, doesn't it? or Say, did you see those Germans?

But I did none of those things, or rather didn't have the opportunity, for some minutes later she got up and walked from the coach house. I now did stare directly, openly, but, unfortunately, it was at her back.

But then another extraordinary thing happened. Just as she was opening the door to leave she looked back at me looking at her boldly. The glance was brief. But it was very, very warm.

Even as I watched her disappear, I couldn't bring myself to act. I sat there confused, embarrassed, frozen. I wondered if I should follow her. I thought, Maybe she's returned to the main house to look at the Vermeer or the Gainsborough or those Germans. I was on the verge of getting up when I considered the smile. Had it really happened? Or had I merely imagined it? Perhaps it had happened to some extent, that is perhaps it had only been a vague, meaningless smile, the kind you get from people sitting across from you on the tube, but I had made it into something else, something grander, having gotten carried away by all that quiet beauty and ovalness. But then I considered her second look and that confirmed the first.

Of course, the more I allowed this array of possibilities to pass through my brain, the farther away the woman got. I suppose that's what part of me wanted—for her to get far enough away so I couldn't catch up. Because I didn't know what I'd say if I did catch up. There I am, hurrying up to her in the house, possibly running up to her on the road, breathless, exhausted. She's a bit unnerved. She backs off somewhat. She awaits an explanation. I smile at her softly. "Well," I finally say, "I thought it was going to rain before. But nothing happened." She backs off more. She looks at me oddly. She looks about for help. I want to tell her that I don't have a way with words, that it's something that runs in the family, something that I inher-

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ited from my dad, an ink-covered mute, but I just stand there in the road smiling, the mad Englishman from the Germans' guidebook to London.

By the time I stop thinking, get up, hurry back to the house, head out the front entrance and on to the road, she's nowhere to be seen. It's too late. I've lost her. She's vanished.

But, I tell myself later as I slowly walk back to town in an odd semi-trance, here and yet not here at all, but, I tell myself, and it's a big but as buts go, she'll be back, because something passed between us, and she'll be back next Saturday, like I will, to find out what that something was.

Yes, I thought, as I descended Heath Street, she knows that I'll be back as well.

Yes, I said, as I sat in the tube smiling to myself, we'll both be back.

It was a strange time for me, those next several days. I kept remembering that smile, that glance in all sorts of places, at all sorts of moments—on the staircase, eating pork pie, going through papers and reports at work, in the loo, strolling along the Strand at lunchtime, sipping beef broth, watching the telly, riding the lift, selecting a new tie, crossing Russell Square, shopping for a new jacket, staring up from my bed at the shadows of the blinds on the ceiling, buying a new shirt, listening to the rain. And the more I thought of her smile, followed by that good-bye glance, living those moments again and again, her eyes meeting mine, our eyes fixed briefly on each other's, the more certain I was that I would see her again, that it had to happen. For what she was saying with that smile was, Look at us here, how ridiculous, how mad, who'd have ever thought we'd reach such a point, to come here of all places, it's so very amusing I could smile, I will smile. There.

I pictured her in a flat much like mine, going about her life quietly, without anyone taking great notice, except for an eccentric or two on the stairs. I could see her in an office much like mine, dealing with the same collection of types, wondering where she was going next, wondering what she was doing here in the first place. I could see her walking about Regent's Park on weekends, considering the flowers, the pandas in the zoo or

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walking about the city at night, cheered only by the lights of Piccadilly reflected in the wet streets.

At times, the week seemed to be going by slowly, maddeningly so. I longed for Saturday. At other times, the prospect of that day finally arriving troubled me, for everything would be resolved then, one way or the other, and so the hours seemed to race by.

All the while I realized the odds against what I was hoping for. But whenever I had that thought, I looked on the positive side, feeling that luck was with me, had been with me since the day at Kenwood, that something good had been set in motion, that everything was going to work on my behalf from now on. I could already feel it in my bones, this sense that nothing would be the same again.

And yet I was bothered by what was happening to me. My friend Arthur summed it up one evening at the Cock and Bull. "What's the matter with you?" he asked after we had had several beers. "Are you feeling under the weather or what?" "How do you mean?" I asked. "I don't know. There's something odd about you," he said. "You must know. You sound very sure of yourself." "I don't know," he said, "but I think it's that you're missing your edge. Yes. I think that's it. Your edge is missing."

I soon realized that other people were finding the same sort of thing, though they didn't say so. It was the way they regarded me that made me realize it. People tended to back away at work. I tended to do the same. A few quick nods or a quick hello was about as passionate as we got. The exchanges weren't all that different now, but there was something resembling friendliness about the business. Rather frightening, I thought. And once or twice I even found myself smiling. Smiling at them. What's going on here? I wondered.

I began to puzzle over the whole course of events. If it took so little—a look from an oval-faced, oval-eyed woman—to break a mood that had been with me for years, then what had that mood been all about, how seriously could it be taken, how seriously could I be taken? The more I thought about this former me, this other me, the more like a bloody overwrought fool he appeared. But the more I thought about the me who was emerging now, this vaguely smiling, vaguely friendly chap,

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the more soft, sentimental and ridiculous he seemed. Well, I wondered, where does that leave me then? Where in hell?

I don't know how many times I told myself that the hoping was absurd, that the possibility of her appearing again was so remote it wasn't worth considering. But the notion that she would, the tingling feeling it gave me was too pleasant to dismiss. I also began to believe that if I hoped enough, if I thought enough about her return, the thinking alone might make it happen. I would, in a way, think her to think of me, think her into action, think her back.

It was a Thursday evening, I remember, only one and a half days before the day, and I was extremely nervous as I left work, even though everything had been vaguely friendly and I had smiled a lot. I walked along the Strand for a bit and then rang up Arthur, but he wasn't at home. Probably out stalking his ex-wife or else taking out some woman who resembled the bitch. Arthur was beginning to worry me in a serious way.

I finally returned home and did something I hadn't done in a long time: I phoned up my mother. She was very surprised, almost in a state of shock in fact, as if something dead had rung up. It was then that I realized how long it had been since we last talked. A year was not inconceivable. Though we never had much to say to each other anyway. Even now, after all this time, our conversation left a lot to be desired. "What's the weather like down there?" I said. "Cold," she said, "bloody cold." That was one bit. "What have you been doing with yourself?" I asked. "Looking out the window," she said. That was another. We went on more, but it all amounted to the same thing. "Anything new?" I asked. "*New*?" she asked, completely puzzled. "*New*? How do you mean?" I didn't pursue it. There was a long silence. "Well," she finally responded, "I'm still alive." "Ah, yes," I said. "But that isn't new," she said, "is it?"

I thought, If she had asked me the same question, I would have answered in much the same way. After a year, I had nothing to report. It had been a year in which nothing had happened. Or almost nothing. And that's what I had the urge to tell her, about that *almost*. I think that's why I called her. I had this news. I wanted to tell her that something was about to happen, that in a way it was already happening.

But she wouldn't have understood anyway. She had never

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understood the simple facts about me and had not made much of an effort to learn. "Well, take care of yourself," I said to end it, "I'll try to come down soon." "I'm not going anywhere," she said.

Friday. An unbelievably tense day. I couldn't sit still in the office. I kept walking about, as if I were on an endless tour of the place. I kept saying hello to the same people. I must have run into Henry Carlisle seven times in one hour. In the old days—which had ended only last Saturday—it was rare if I saw him twice in one week. "We're rather active today, aren't we," said Marge something or other, whom I passed repeatedly at the copying machine. I think people were beginning to wonder about me. I think I was making them uneasy. Here was someone who had been the bad sheep of the staff suddenly going about as if he were the life of the office. I was in one of the stalls in the loo when I overheard two of my office mates who had no idea that I was about. "Well, Cole is bloody congenial all of a sudden," one said. "I don't think he's playing with a full deck, if you ask me," said the other. "There's something unnatural about all of this."

Most people were happy to see me leave that night. My restlessness continued and I tried to walk off the tension. I went down to the Victoria Embankment and strolled by the river, stopping to look across at the lights on the South Bank. As I stood there alone in the night, the black river before me, the black sky above me, the gay lights, looking like a party, far in the distance, I thought, It's the same as always. Everything is the same. Absolutely nothing has changed.

For a while I felt very peculiar, sad in a way, empty, as if there were nothing inside me, nothing really holding me together. I felt as if I could fade away into the darkness, disappear in the night. But the feeling faded before I did. It was a cold breeze off the river that snapped me back, and I turned away and continued my walk. It's odd, I thought as I moved up into the city, how these moods seem to come from outside of me, and yet how I was the one who was creating them. Later, as I entered a pub, hearing all the talk and laughter, I couldn't determine what sort of mood I should be in. There were all these feelings inside me and they seemed to be canceling each other out, so I was up one moment and down the next. I

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managed to get a corner table in the back, away from the crowd. As I sipped my ale, I found myself fooling with a piece of mail from work that I'd put in my jacket and had forgotten to throw away. I started drawing on the back of the envelope, first stupid little designs and then faces—or more to the point, a face, one face, her face. I couldn't quite get hold of it. Granted, I'm not much of an artist, but I couldn't even come close. Although I managed the ovalness well enough, the oval face, the oval eyes, the result was more a cartoon than anything else, a sort of moronic creature which didn't appeal in the least. I began to feel rather desperate. I couldn't recall her with any real clarity. She was slipping away. Then the day would slip away as well, along with the feeling itself. I had to get her back. I applied myself to the task, let my memory guide my pen. But it was no use. The cartoon kept appearing, making a mockery of my longing.

I slept perhaps an hour or two that night. I kept trying to imagine her in the coach house, but all I could see was this vague, ghost-like thing which would fade whenever it was about to come into focus. The bloody coach house, on the other hand, I remembered perfectly.

That morning there was a chill in my flat or perhaps just a chill in me. I felt tired and tossed about. But as I dressed I began to get back some of my energy, and slowly but surely the feeling returned. In fact, it came back stronger than ever. It's odd how you're able to give yourself a boost when everything appears to be slipping away.

At first, I put on the new clothes I had bought. I was pleased with my appearance, though I looked too fresh somehow, as if I too had just been removed from a rack. The more I considered myself in the mirror, the more I had second thoughts. I finally changed into the same clothes I had worn the week before. No sense confusing her, I thought. I also thought that the old clothes might serve as a lucky charm. Perhaps if I did everything the same as last Saturday, everything would turn out the same this Saturday. So I wore the same clothes, walked the same odd route to the underground, even strayed about some of the same streets in Hampstead. I was about to go to Keats's house, but my brain stopped me. You're overdoing this bit, it decided.

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I kept looking at my watch. I was earlier than last week, all my actions were earlier. But I didn't want to miss her in the event that she had the same idea. As I walked the road to Kenwood, the sun poured down, giving color and a glow to the road which last week had been gray and grim. I'm a bit of a romantic so I took this as a good omen. I looked for her as I walked, looked ahead, looked behind, but she wasn't about as yet. I grew weaker as I came closer to the house, became slightly light-headed. My heart was pounding so hard that I could hear the beats in my ears.

The guard recognized me. "A lot better than last week, isn't it, sir?" he said. "Yes," I said, smiling, "a lot better." I was pleased that he had remembered me, and I was tempted to ask if he had seen a girl with oval eyes. I moved through each room quickly. There were a number of people about, but she had not arrived.

In the coach house I sat at the same table as the week before. There was a young couple at a far table and an old woman two tables away, but that was all. I reached out to the chair across from me where I had rested my coat and removed a fat little paperbound book from the pocket. It was called *The History of Western Art* or some such thing. I had bought it in Foyles during a lunch hour and thought that it might make a good impression. She seemed like the artistic sort to me. I opened the book to a section on Constable and Gainsborough and pretended to be reading it, holding the book before me, my arms resting on the table. Every now and then I'd glance up from the page of tiny type to the door of the coach house, the door she'd enter.

The time passed. A few more people entered the restaurant, but they were of no interest. At least not after I realized that they weren't her. Because each time the door opened, each time I felt a gust of cold air from the outside, I thought, Here she is now, here she is at last.

I watched the branches and leaves shaking in the breeze. I watched the clouds drifting slowly across the sky like oddly shaped white blimps. I flipped through the book, looked at the pictures. Some were in color and the color was all wrong. Flesh was yellow, skies were green, grass was blue.

I noticed that the fingers of my right hand were drumming

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the tabletop after they had turned a page. I kept looking at the door, the surrounding table, the sky, back to the door.

Suddenly I slammed shut the book. "Damn rotten color!" I said aloud, though I had intended to curse under my breath. A couple at a nearby table looked at me as if I were mad.

I threw open the door and searched the grounds, surveying the lawn. The wind blew across my hot face. There was this great anger in me. I was surprised by it, surprised by its intensity. I thought I had been done with all of that.

At the same time, there was a sense of disappointment, of betrayal, of not measuring up. By God, I thought as my cheeks burned, I'm worth returning to—I'm a congenial soul, a bit of a romantic, loved by my office. It's odd how flexible I could be at this point. Here I was ready to lash out at anyone, and yet if she appeared I knew my mood would change completely, instantly. And that's the way I moved about for the next hour, through the grounds, into the coach house again, angry at my failure yet ready to be hopeful, sad yet ready to be happy, not able to settle on any one feeling. After a while, moving in, out and about like this, turning hot, then cold, shifting from the new me to the old and then back again, jumping from one person to another, one mood to another, one temperature to another, I became rather exhausted and somewhat dizzy. I stopped dead in my tracks. "You all right, sir?" the guard asked, as I stood lost in the middle of the library, holding out my arms slightly, as if I expected to lose my balance. I tried to pull myself together, but there was so much flying about inside me. "Fine," I said, though quite dazed. "You looked a bit odd, sir, that's why I asked." "I was sort of perched on a thought. You know how it is sometimes. You try to remember something but the bloody thing just doesn't come." "Oh, yes, indeed. I get to think quite a lot in my work. In fact, there's not much else to do. Thinking and watching, those are the main ingredients. It can be a curse as much as a blessing—thinking so much." "Yes, the brain is a funny thing." "Well put, sir. Well put." For a while we just stood there in the middle of the library considering the thought. I felt a bit dizzy again, but didn't let on. "Say," I finally asked him, "you haven't by any chance seen a young woman about with oval eyes?"

A number of hours passed. I sat in the coach house for much

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of the time, trying to decide what to do next. Sometimes just for a distraction, to give my mind a rest from all the problems, I dipped into *The History of Western Art.* I forgot most of what I'd read by the time I got to the next page. The brain is a funny thing.

I was the last to leave Kenwood. The guard bid me a good evening. As I walked the road back to town, I didn't know what to feel, didn't know what I'd be like when I got back to the city, to my flat, to my office. The thought crossed my mind that I had acted like a damn fool what with all this romantic rot. But then suddenly I got all soft again, and thought, I'll put an ad in the paper next week, asking the girl with the oval face and oval eyes and gray scarf to meet me next Saturday at 12 noon at Kenwood. I'll make it happen, I thought. But then the anger filled me again, anger at her, at myself, at the occasional car passing in the road, at the trees and falling leaves and the beauty and the whole bloody business.

As I reached the Heath and descended into town, I thought of myself as a boy and remembered the times I had wondered if the person I was was really the person I wanted to be, and how and why this person had come into being. I moved past the shops now, the people going in and coming out, enjoying the streets like market day in a village. I felt vaguely part of it and at the same time as far away from it as possible. And as I stood in the tube station waiting for the train back to the city, I realized that never before in my life had I known myself less, never before had I been more confused as to what I was all about.

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DANA GIOIA

Counting the Children

I

"This must have been her bedroom, Mr. Choi.
It's hard to tell. The only other time
I came back here was when I found her body."

Neither of us belonged there. She lived next door.
I was the accountant sent out by the State
To take an inventory of the house.

When someone wealthy dies without a will,
The Court sends me to audit the estate.
They know that strangers trust a man who listens.

The neighbor led me down an unlit hall.
We came up to a double door and stopped.
She whispered as if someone else were near.

"She used to wander around town at night
And riffle through the trash. We all knew that.
But what we didn't know about was *them*."

She stepped inside and fumbled for a switch.
It didn't work, but light leaked through the curtains.
"Come in," she said. "I want to show you hell."

I walked into a room of wooden shelves
Stretching from floor to ceiling, wall to wall,
With smaller shelves arranged along the center.

A crowd of faces looked up silently.
Shoulder to shoulder, standing all in rows,
Hundreds of dolls were lining every wall.

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Not a collection anyone would want—
Just ordinary dolls salvaged from the trash
With dozens of each kind all set together.

Some battered, others missing arms and legs,
Shelf after shelf of the same dusty stare
As if despair could be assuaged by order.

They looked like sisters huddling in the dark,
Forgotten brides abandoned at the altar,
Their veils turned yellow, dresses stiff and soiled.

Rows of discarded little girls and babies—
Some naked, others dressed for play—they wore
Whatever lives their owners left them in.

Where were the children who promised them love?
The small, caressing hands, the lips which whispered
Secrets in the dark? Once they were woken,

Each by name. Now they have become each other—
Anonymous except for injury,
The beautiful and headless side by side.

Was this where all lost childhoods go? These dim
Abandoned rooms, these crude arrangements staged
For settled dust and shadow, left to prove

That all affection is outgrown, or show
The uniformity of our desire?
How dismal someone else's joy can be.

I stood between the speechless shelves and knew
Dust has a million lives, the heart has one.
I turned away and started my report.

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II

That night I dreamt of working on a ledger,
A book so large it stretched across my desk,
Thousands of numbers running down each page.

I knew I had to settle the account,
Yet as I tried to calculate the total,
The numbers started slipping down the page,

Suddenly breaking up like Scrabble letters
Brushed into a box to end a game,
Each strained-for word uncoupled back to nil.

But as I tried to add them back together
And hold each number on the thin green line
Where it belonged, I realized that now

Nothing I did would ever fit together.
In my hands even 2 + 2 + 2
No longer equaled anything at all.

And then I saw my father there beside me.
He asked me why I couldn't find the sum.
He held my daughter crying in his arms.

My family stood behind him in a row,
Uncles and aunts, cousins I'd never seen,
My grandparents from China and their parents,

All of my family, living and dead,
A line that stretched as far as I could see.
Even the strangers called to me by name.

And now I saw I wasn't at my desk
But working on the coffin of my daughter,
And she would die unless I found the sum.

But I had lost too many of the numbers.
They tumbled to the floor and blazed on fire.
I saw the dolls then—screaming in the flames.

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III

When I awoke, I sat up straight in bed.
The sweaty sheet was twisted in my hands.
My heart was pounding. Had I really screamed?

But, no, my wife was still asleep beside me.
I got up quietly and found my robe,
Knowing I couldn't fall asleep again.

Then groping down the unlit hall, I saw
A soft-edged light beneath my daughter's door.
It was the night-light plugged in by her bed.

And I remembered when she was a baby,
How often I would get up in the night
And creep into that room to watch her sleep.

I never told my wife how many times
I came to check each night—or that I was
Always afraid of what I might discover.

I felt so helpless standing by her crib,
Watching the quiet motions of her breath
In the half-darkness of the faint night-light.

How delicate this vessel in our care,
This gentle soul we summoned to the world,
A life we treasured but could not protect.

This was the terror I could not confess—
Not even to my wife—and it was the joy
My daughter had no words to understand.

So standing at my pointless watch each night
In the bare nursery we had improvised,
I learned the loneliness that we call love.

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IV

But I gave up those vigils years ago.
My daughter's seven now, and I don't worry—
At least no more than any father does.

But waking up last night after the dream,
Trembling in the hall, looking at her door,
I let myself be drawn into her room.

She was asleep—the blankets softly rising
And falling with each breath, the faint light tracing
The sleek unfoldings of her long black hair.

Then suddenly I felt myself go numb.
And though you won't believe that an accountant
Can have a vision, I will tell you mine.

Each of us thinks our own child beautiful,
But watching her and marveling at the sheer
Smoothness of skin without a scar or blemish,

I saw beyond my daughter to all children,
And, though elated, still I felt confused
Because I wondered why I never sensed

That thrill of joy when looking at adults
No matter how refined or beautiful,
Why lust or envy always intervened.

There is no *tabula rasa* for the soul.
Each spirit, be it infant, bird or flower,
Comes to the world perfected and complete,

And only time proves its unraveling.
But I'm digressing from my point, my vision.
What I meant to ask is merely this:

What if completion comes only in beginnings?
The naked tree exploding into flower?
And all our prim assumptions about time

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Prove wrong. What if we cannot read the future
Because our destiny moves back in time,
And only memory speaks prophetically?

We long for immortality, a soul
To rise up flaming from the body's dust.
I know that it exists. I felt it there,

Perfect and eternal in the way
That only numbers are, intangible but real,
Infinitely divisible yet whole.

But we do not possess it in ourselves.
We die, and it abides, and we are one
With all our ancestors, while it divides

Over and over, common to us all,
The ancient face returning in the child,
The distant arms embracing us, the salt

Of our blind origins filling our veins.
I stood confused beside my daughter's bed
Surprised to find the room around me dim.

Then glancing at the bookshelf in the corner,
I saw she'd lined her dolls up in a row.
Three little girls were sitting in the dark.

Their sharp glass eyes surveyed me with contempt.
They recognized me only as a rival,
The one whose world would keep no place for them.

I felt like holding them tight in my arms,
Promising I would never let them go,
But they would trust no promises of mine.

I feared that if I touched one, it would scream.

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HAROLD FROMM

Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist

With the appearance of yet another life of Sylvia Plath, the cultural observer may very well wonder whether the world really needs three biographies in a period of less than fifteen years. Plath's literary reputation is founded, after all, upon a handful of startling poems and a seemingly accessible novel, *The Bell Jar*, that in reality may be not so much accessible as adaptable to political uses. After her suicide in 1963, her writings sold like editions of the *National Enquirer*, providing a convenient sand box for voyeurs and crude feminists on the lookout for mudpie effigies of "Daddy." But once the more sensational aspects of the Plath phenomenon began to pale, it became possible to focus upon her poetic craft, frequently at the expense of the tortured consciousness that nourished it. Since biographies, however, both reflect and influence the history of literary reception of which they are a part, Anne Stevenson's new version of the life of Sylvia Plath turns out to be anything but supererogatory.[1]

Edward Butscher's pioneering work of 1976, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*,[2] though nowadays disparaged, was a remarkable achievement for someone to whom the major archives were unavailable. It was not until 1977 that Indiana University purchased the bulk of Plath's letters and other valuable materials from her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, nor until 1981 that Ted Hughes sold another very large cache of his wife's manuscripts to Smith College. *Letters Home*, Aurelia Plath's edition of letters, mostly to herself from Sylvia, appeared only in time for Butscher to mention it in his notes. Without having seen the bulk of Plath's journals or letters, Butscher managed to extract an extraordinary database from

[1] BITTER FAME: A Life of Sylvia Plath, by *Anne Stevenson*. Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.

[2] New York, 1976.

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interviews with survivors and to get more than the general outlines of her life quite right. It was already well-known that the death of her father when she was eight was a blow from which she never seemed to recover, that she was nurtured by a loving mother and grandparents, and that she had a brilliant career at Smith College, during which she published poems and fiction in national periodicals and won several prizes. After miraculously surviving her first suicide attempt at twenty-one and recovering in a mental hospital, she returned to Smith, won a Fulbright to England for a second undergraduate degree at Cambridge, met and married Ted Hughes and had two children. It was a relationship that worked wonders for both their craft and fame, until things began to unhinge.

Butscher's thematic characterization of Plath as "bitch goddess" was hardly wide of the mark. His insight into her precarious psyche was convincing, and his appreciation of her poetic genius very sensitive indeed. What prevented definitiveness, however, besides the limited documentation, was his wildly excessive psychologizing; his readiness to swallow the program of feminist-ascribed ills that patriarchal society was reputed to have foisted upon Sylvia as a woman, including an extreme hostility to Aurelia Plath, whom he treated as an almost malevolent agent of patriarchal bourgeois repressivity and conventionality; his excessively long accounts of minor events for which he happened to have a lot of information; the absence of material about important moments in Plath's life, as well as a very thin account of Ted Hughes and the breakup of their marriage, which had the effect (if not the intention) of putting the burden of blame upon Hughes in default of his side of the story; and by no means least of all, his egregiously extensive, rather unintelligible readings of Plath's poems. Nevertheless, his accomplishment was more than nugatory.

Whereas Butscher's prose was feverishly overcharged and portentous ("Spurred by the double tragedy of miscarriage and appendectomy . . ."), Linda Wagner-Martin's 1987 biography successfully avoided this and most of Butscher's other liabilities as well. The writing is plain and lucid (to the point of flat-footedness at times); Plath's poems and fiction are used edifyingly, without any of Butscher's clumsiness; Aurelia Plath is treated as a benign platonic idea of motherly selflessness; the

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point of view is feminist but seemingly controlled ("Plath knew that, because she was a woman writer, her work would be judged by standards different from those used to judge the work of male writers"[3]); the account makes use of just about every document, published and unpublished, available at the time of writing, as well as more than 200 interviews; and the narration is cool and factual with little overt "interpretation." Indeed, Wagner-Martin's excellent "Introduction" to her 1984 collection of writings about Sylvia Plath reveals more openly than her biography her enthusiastic feminist commitment. Interpreting the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems* as proof that "the power of Plath's art finally won out—over all the detractors, the enviers, the death-mongers," she goes on to observe that "had Plath been only a suicidal poet, writing in a narrow and obsessively limited voice," such recognition could never have taken place.[4] Yet although Wagner-Martin uses both the letters home and the journals—a schizophrenic duality if there ever was one—to provide concrete documentation of Plath's dizzying mental swings, she could not resist either the downplayings or the heightenings that her feminism, however controlled, seemed to require. Thus, apart from the absence in her account of any words like "madness," or "schizophrenic," or "manic-depressive," she attributes Plath's rage, depressions, and bitchiness merely to "childhood years of loss and perceived abandonment," has little to say about Sylvia's discomfitingly ill-tempered relationship with Ted's sister, Olwyn Hughes (and a lot of other people), and excuses the almost unprecedented malice of her literary use of family and friends with remarks like "Plath's depiction of her mother and other female characters may trouble the reader who knows her biography, but *The Bell Jar* is fiction, and in fiction real people are transformed." Even more surprisingly, she devotes only one sentence to such indelible events as Sylvia's destruction of Ted's work in progress—his play, poems, notebooks, drafts, and even his favorite edition of Shakespeare—on one of the many paranoid occasions when she imagined him to be flirting with other women, a destruction that was not to be the last. Although Wagner-

[3] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York, 1987), p. 12.
[4] *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Linda Wagner (Boston, 1984), p. 1.

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Martin's quotations from the journals make it perfectly clear that Plath's psyche was a maelstrom of raging conflicts, the effect of her narrative understatement is to counteract Plath's own words, producing sympathy for the "victim." And while she herself is not hard upon Ted Hughes, praising the excellences of their marriage while stressing that it was Sylvia who banished him when he finally *was* having an affair, she is too partial to Sylvia's point of view, perhaps because she has so little information from any other.

Wagner-Martin's increasingly fractious relationship with Olwyn Hughes, which she details in her "Preface," undoubtedly provided an obstacle course which she had to get around by cutting and paraphrasing when Olwyn and Ted began to make increasingly demanding editorial decisions in exchange for permissions to quote. Though it is never made entirely clear what the Hugheses were objecting to, their grounds for objection are now largely clarified by the appearance of Stevenson's *Bitter Fame.*

If Wagner-Martin's apologies for Sylvia Plath suggest that art overcomes everything, especially if the art is female, Anne Stevenson's aim is to redress the balance with fresh information that reveals more of the "everything" that up until now has been slighted. Greatly indebted to Olwyn Hughes for permissions and direct help, she describes her book as "almost a work of dual authorship," and in this case, at least, it may very well be that two heads have been better than any previous single one. "Until now," she informs us, "a whole side of [Plath's] story—that of her marriage—has been inadequately or erroneously presented. This was due primarily to Ted Hughes's understandable insistence on the privacy of his life and the lives of his children. . . . Much of the new material will surprise those who have accepted the current view of Sylvia Plath." But more than new material is involved. What becomes apparent from the very first paragraph of Stevenson's preface is that this is going to be an actively interpretive biography, fusing together all of the previously expressed points of view with new information and outlooks that throw everything slightly askew. Her technique of synthesis-cum-interpretation can be seen in a discussion of Sylvia's obsession with her father, an obsession that, in "Daddy," produced a "tangle of imagery—illogical, surreal, untrue

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as to the fact but inseparable from Sylvia's psychic reality." Inexorably, "in her peculiarly hallucinatory imagination," her father Otto "would emerge from the shadow side of Sylvia's stories and poems as the Proteus of her Herculean effort to free herself of his image. Menacingly, irresistibly, he would reappear in her work as a Colossus, a sea-god muse, a drowned suicide, an archetypal Greek king, a beekeeper (brave master of a dangerous colony), even, as in the famous poem 'Daddy,' a fictitiously brutal combination of husband and Luftwaffe Nazi." Compressed, intense, jolting, and decidedly non-feminist, Stevenson's accounts are less a matter of radical revelation than of someone lighting a fuse that has always been dangling in the attentive reader's peripheral vision.

What is, strictly speaking, new in this life is the light it sheds on the mysterious breakup of the Hugheses' marriage, the early signs of which Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes are in a position to provide. Of course, the strain of domestic life for six years with someone as emotionally volatile as Sylvia, whose barely repressed angers often erupted into terrible scenes among friends, had even in the earlier biographies appeared as grounds for marital conflict. Now we learn how the "bright and smiling mask" that Sylvia presented was so often followed by rages, and how Ted Hughes found these moods "largely unaccountable: they began and ended like electric storms, and he came to learn simply to accept their occurrence," sometimes with only a gesture of helplessness. "He had tried to reason with Sylvia on similar occasions, he said, but it was no use. She adamantly refused anything that sounded like criticism and simply became hysterical." Visits to his parents in Yorkshire produced tense and painful scenes that caused Ted to write his sister in an attempt to account for Sylvia's bizarre behavior. And elsewhere in the narrative, Lucas Myers, Olwyn Hughes, Richard Murphy, and others reflect upon their own disastrous encounters with Sylvia, the most intense of which is a long addendum in which Dido Merwin reports on Sylvia's fits of jealousy regarding other women (in her journals, Plath comments on some of these events herself). Stevenson even records Aurelia Plath's disarray at Sylvia's treatment of Ted while she is visiting them in England, as well as an epiphanal passage from a letter in which Mrs. Plath remarks that Sylvia "made use of

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everything and often transmuted gold into lead. . . . These emotions in another person would dissipate with time, but with Sylvia they were written at the moment of intensity to become ineradicable as an epitaph engraved on a tombstone." In Anne Stevenson's account of the Hugheses, the reader is prepared for disaster long before it finally takes place.

Although this narrative is highly critical of Plath throughout, there is no *a priori* reason why the perspective from the Hughes side should be any more inaccurate than the perspective from the more familiar Plath one. Indeed, though A. Alvarez, an old Plath supporter, seemed outraged by Stevenson's biography in his *New York Review of Books* account (Sept. 28, 1989), he had very little quarrel with anything in particular that Stevenson had to say—he just didn't like it: "Thereafter the picture builds steadily of a sick and fragile personality, probably borderline psychotic, subject to unreasonable and unreasoning rages and fits of jealousy, exaggerated enthusiasms and inky depressions, who spent her life secretly raging against a father who had abandoned her by dying when she was eight years old." Unable to disagree with this characterization, he soothes his vexation by shifting gears into the Ars Vincit Omnia mode that we have already seen in Wagner-Martin: "However far gone she was at the end, she also possessed enormous powers of recovery and was in touch with an incomparably rich inner world. Whence the power and beauty of her last poems, and also their extraordinary detachment." After quoting Plath's valedictory last poem, "Edge," he concludes: "What matters here is not the Medea-like tragedy but the uncanny artistic detachment that allows the imagery to develop its own lucid, calm life."

If the first period of Plath reception could be thought of as the "madness and melodrama" phase, the second period, which perhaps may now be drawing to a close, could be called the "transcendence of art" phase. Given this latter mode of reception, it becomes imperative that we not miss two passing comments that Anne Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes make in the course of *Bitter Fame*—marking a radical departure from previous treatments of Sylvia Plath—because despite the general boldness of their book, their voices at these moments betray a trace of timorousness and qualification, as they eye the pile of bricks waiting in readiness to be thrown at them.

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Speaking of the startling nature of Plath's "Daddy," "the shock of pure fury . . . the smoldering rage with which she is declaring herself free, both of ghostly father and of husband," Stevenson concludes, "The implication is that after this exorcism her life can begin again, that she will be reborn. And indeed *on ethical grounds* [emphasis added] only a desperate bid for life and psychic health can even begin to excuse this and several other of the Ariel poems." And on the biography's final, emphatic page, where the feminist vandals of Plath's tombstone are also excoriated, Stevenson quotes Olwyn Hughes: "Sylvia may be a *poète maudit*, but she is an achieved mature one: her work is hermetic, even, *on ethical grounds* [emphasis added], questionable. But as art it is unassailable." This introduction of ethics, the implications of which have so angered A. Alvarez and the Ars Vincit Omnia crowd, becomes all the more worth considering in the light of the present climate in which Heidegger, Eliot, Pound, and even Mencken, are being raked over the coals for their ethical shortcomings. So it is tempting to say, "And why not Plath?"

But a more general question might be tackled first: Just what *was* Sylvia Plath's "problem"? The consensus seems to be that Plath was unable to forge a coherent self from the multiple and warring fragments of her psyche. She remained a captive of the "primary processes," of the pre-social and pre-linguistic unconscious where time and space are minimal, and where desires manipulate the contents of consciousness to produce satisfaction at any cost, including the gratifications of hallucination. Her journals and letters home are blatant documents of this phenomenon, which is the most pervasive characteristic of all her writings. These journals and the letters to her mother represent "selves" so radically opposed that one can hardly believe they are emanations of the same person, the journals so agonized and self-lacerating, the letters so gushingly chirpy and upbeat, often with regard to the very same events. But Plath herself recognized this problem only too well, as the journals themselves reveal:

> God, is this all it is, the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? of self-worship and self-loathing? of glory and disgust?

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> Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God—or the universal woman-and-man—or anything much. . . . But if I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos.
>
> I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between.[5]

But early on she also recognized the "solution": "Writing makes me a small god: I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make. I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste." The resolution is frightening: "My house of days and masks is rich enough so that I might and must spend years fishing, hauling up the pearl-eyed, horny, scaled and sea-bearded monsters sunk long, long in the Sargasso of my imagination." And the most interesting of her reflections is not found in her journals at all but in a high school diary quoted by Aurelia Plath in *Letters Home*: "I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God.' Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be—perhaps I am *destined* to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I."[6]

As things turned out, however, Plath was never able to form a coherent public self and she remained indeed almost free of classification and qualification. Her letters and behavior were so kaleidoscopic that they seemed to derive from no central, public, or "ego" core. She appeared to be comprised of two computer programs: an unalterable hardware program (a ROM [read-only memory] of primary process), and a RAM (random-access memory) software program that—like many computer games—gave the illusion of interactive behavior with other people, although it was really just serendipitous coincidence. As she grew older and moved away from her supernormal golden girl period in which she could still aim to please, her immutable, pre-programmed, read-only memory took over,

[5] *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1982), pp. 13, 23, 24.
[6] New York, 1975, p. 40.

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and her ability to interact "correctly," i.e. "sanely," with an outside world kept decreasing until it reached zero. Had she not killed herself at thirty, she would doubtless have done so at thirty-one, since no wherewithal for human interaction remained: the computer had crashed. Speaking of her multitude of "false selves," and her gradual arrival at her "true" one, Ted Hughes—much too optimistically—writes in his Foreword to the journals that "*Ariel* and the associated later poems give us the voice of that [true] self. They are the proof that it arrived. All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation." Those "waste products," however, happened to be the residual shreds of her sanity.

In her brilliant explication of Plath's personal mythology as a moon-goddess and the role that mythology played in her poems, Judith Kroll[7] succeeds in demonstrating that the earlier poems are often unsuccessful because the mythology is imposed from without, like stale and allusive poetic conventions, whereas in the celebrated later poems the mythology has been so internalized that the poems are organically whole—though completely obscure if the reader is unable to decipher the terms of the system. Few concessions are made to a recognizable public world in these late poems, which are almost totally symbolic of Plath's primary processes as her life fell apart and she withdrew into her primordial self. In their perverse way, some of these poems may seem "perfect" (if one has cracked their code) but the ultimate cost, both for the author and the reader, exceeds the cost of almost any other poems that come to mind. (And thinking back on the castrati of eighteenth-century opera, one may legitimately wonder at what point the cost of art becomes *too* high for any possible justification.) For Plath's "true self" consisted of the purest primary processes uncompromised by interaction with reality, un"classified" and un"qualified" by others. From this stem her unremitting rages against everybody about everything, rages that had no real grounds or objects but which were part of her original resistance to lost omnipotence,

[7] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1976). Kroll has a tendency to overexplain the poems, making them too coherent. When one returns to the poems themselves, they often seem as obscure as they did in the first place.

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which recognized that an uncontrollable outside world required a farewell to all delusions of godhood. During her last stage of life, however, her rages sudsided as she shut down the doorways of perception and withdrew completely into a quasi-mystical, once-again omnipotent private universe. At the age of two months, we call this sense of omnipotence "normality." At the age of thirty, the conventional word for such a state is "madness."

But before returning to "ethics," there are two other questions about Plath that still must be addressed, her "feminism" and her "craft." Although Plath speaks early in her journals about her discontents with being a woman ("I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled"), as well as her distaste for the prospect of spending her life making scrambled eggs for some man, as time passes she takes up—with a greedy vengeance—the roles of femme fatale and then procreative mother. In this, as in everything else, she entertained virtually every possible view, every possible self, from virginally pious daughter to roaring bitch to moon-goddess to adoring mother to bourgeois puritan, and intermixed with all of them was a powerful attraction to men. None of these selves can be accorded more authentic priority than any of the others. Had there been ten possible sexes instead of two, she would have raged against each of them seriatim, since it was not femaleness or maleness that she hated but *incarnation itself*. To be a creature in space and time was to be limited, classified, qualified, and to her this was wildly insupportable. Nor was she able to take responsibility for *any* of her incarnations. Her real life took place amidst the timelessness of mythology and not amidst the crap and piss of mortality.

As for craft, in the sixties Irving Howe characterized her as "an interesting minor poet," a verdict against which there has been considerable resistance. Alvarez and Wagner-Martin are representative of the way in which all other aspects of Sylvia Plath's existence have been pushed aside in order to extol her extraordinary craft. The question of major or minor status is not a matter of fact, so with regard to poetic craft Sylvia Plath

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may be as major as any poet in English. But with regard to the larger "world" upon which poetic craft operates—its subject matter, substance, and moral direction, as well as its relation to human life and possibility—it would be utterly preposterous to compare her with such undisputed major poets as Milton, Wordsworth, or Yeats, or even more debatable cases like Shelley, Tennyson, or Eliot. Richard Crashaw may well be her closest counterpart. For we expect from major writers a consciousness-raising operation, an opening up of the reader's experience to the complexities of a larger world, from which Sylvia Plath was completely cut off. Even her most accessible poems are largely incapable of changing the way in which we experience the world, since she had little interest in anything incarnated, apart from the recondite drama of her own primordial psyche. We learn from her most acclaimed poems only about the aberrations of this-particular-psyche-here, little about a world out there. Experience, for her, was only raw material to be fitted to the opening of her holocaustic funnel and then sucked into the savage tornado of her immutable myth. If her experience is taken to have anything to do with a public world, it can only produce the outrage and vexation that Anne Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes express when they contemplate the horrible rape and mutilation that Plath's writings performed on her mother, her father, and her husband—and everyone else as well—as she incorporated them into the other-worldly distortions of her solipsistic psychodrama.

Although I sympathize completely with Anne Stevenson's and Olwyn Hughes's introduction of the question of ethical responsibility, since human beings, even when they are poets, must be dealt with according to conventional human values as long as they are actors in a communal world; and although no amount of "craft" can exonerate artists from the responsibilities of being a person, because *craft is not enough*—it seems to me that ethical obligations can be justly required only from human beings we consider free agents, however relative the term "free." But it is very hard to look upon Sylvia Plath in any such light. If her madness was as controlling a force as I judge it to be, the options of ethical responsibility would not appear to have been available to her, since her range of choice was perilously confined, and she scattered ruin on everything she

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touched. Where the question of ethics really arises, as I see it, is among those of her admirers who insist on brushing aside all of these important considerations of human values in order to affirm that craft is everything and overrides everything else. The matter is far from simple, and though it may ultimately be regarded as undecidable (as in the cases of Heidegger, Pound, et al.), undecidability is a much better resolution of this dilemma than unqualified admiration. Mankind simply cannot live by craft alone, and if poets qualify as members of mankind, there is no way they can escape the value systems that bind whoever would call himself a member of any particular human society.

Like Kafka's hunger artist, Sylvia Plath was an unworldly specialist in suffering who performed in front of the peanut-crunching crowd that both applauded and doubted the authenticity of her performance. She too knew "how easy it was to fast," because her hunger was not satisfied by anything available in this world. "I have to fast," the hunger artist informs his overseer, "I can't help it, because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." Like the hunger artist, Plath depended on craft as surrogate for the substance of this world, a craft of mythmaking words to control "the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make." This craft enabled her to survive for a while and to exhibit, like an athlete or nuclear physicist, some of the questionable feats that human technology can accomplish. But our praise for her craft ought to be highly qualified—because in her case, it was madness.

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DENNIS SAMPSON

Before the Movie Begins

The light is dimmed and something like love
comes over every one of us, the kids
off to my right calming to a whisper and a couple
close to death (they must be in their eighties)
helping each other with their coats,
then sitting silently before the movie begins;
but there is a while still for light
conversation and even mild applause
when a can is kicked over and descends
this hillside of cement facing the screen;
time for the late-comers that flood the seats
with light near the door to stumble one
behind the other down the aisle
and the attendant to reprimand a teenager
for shrieking, steering his beam of light in her eyes.

See how the arm is lifted at last
alongside the neck of another,
how the head of a woman leans
and the failures of everyone are forgiven
with a hand that caresses the hair of a man
unhappy with his life; a family
passes popcorn back and forth
while somebody shows their wrist watch
to the screen to see how much time we have.
There is the girlfriend glad for the first time
since the dance, when the one
around whom she has constructed her future
fell into the arms of the first-to-ask;
there is the brother and sister in the front
dropped off by their parents and scarcely visible.

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What is this sudden kinship that I feel
with the people in this half-empty theatre,
not only the old couple closing
the wrapper on their candy so they won't be tempted,
the children too, and horde of adolescents
grooming themselves in the darkness
that diminishes the longer we all sit here?
Who will be the martyr? Who will grieve?
Who will discover love at the end of a long
and mystifying life and die in peace?
Somebody changes seats and their fate
is altered . . . or they remain the same;
the curtain parts and we prepare
(a child touched to silence, an anonymous *shissh*)
for what is coming, and does not come.
And we see each other completely in the light.

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DAVID DOOLEY

The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic

"What's wrong with contemporary American poetry?" The topic has occupied numerous poets and critics in recent years. Two of the wittiest and most engaging of these essays are the title piece of Donald Hall's *Poetry and Ambition* and Fred Muratori's "Traditional Form and the Living, Breathing American Poet" (*New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Winter 1986). Hall diagnoses the problem with contemporary poets as lack of ambition—the ambition, that is, to be a great poet. Furthermore, Hall demonstrates how writing workshops and M.F.A. programs actually foster this lack of ambition. Muratori gathers pertinent quotations from several critics about the limitations of the prevailing poetic modes, adding his own vivid characterizations ("the Windchime Poem . . . its spare and non-discursive form allows it to whisper, sigh, and tinkle in the gentle wind of its own self-absorption") before turning to discuss the use of rhyme and meter in recent poems.

Neither Hall nor Muratori provides analysis of specific works to indicate what is actually wrong with most contemporary poetry. Neither do most of the other writers who have addressed this topic, yet this kind of analysis is essential to the argument. All of us can assent to the proposition that somewhere out there are poets, unnamed, who write trivial poetry. Poets have written trivially in every age and in every style. But how are poets writing trivially today? How do the prevalent modes of poetry encourage feeble writing?

This essay will attempt to answer those questions, first by codifying ideas about contemporary poetry in ten theses and then by discussing particular poems. Choice of representative poems is difficult. Logically, one could attack workshop poetry by considering poems ("McPoems," as Hall says) from an actual M.F.A. workshop. However, attacking student work seems

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manifestly unfair. The workshop habit of mind is surely most insidious in the work of a poet of some ability, one who might, given other approaches to writing, produce better poems. Inferior work which has been praised by critics, given prizes, and/or anthologized, is particularly suitable for criticism; three of my six cautionary examples fall in this category. A fourth example was offered by the poet himself to display his ability in revision. The other two poems provide striking illustrations of common failings, and are drawn from poets capable of much better work.

10 Theses About the Workshop Aesthetic

1. Since the 1960s, the staple of American poetry, the kind of poetry which fills literary magazines both established and obscure, has been the workshop lyric.

2. Workshop lyrics generally fall into three modes: the domesticated confessional, the quasi-surreal, and the regional-pastoral. The domesticated confessional poem descends from the work of such poets as Lowell, Berryman, Sexton, and Plath, with the important difference that the more recent writers have not been institutionalized, but the confessional manner has been. The quasi-surreal mode includes such sub-genres as the "deep image" poem, the chthonic manner of W. S. Merwin, and the surrealist cute school of poets like James Tate. Although the better regional-pastoral poets—Wendell Berry is a good example—know something about their subjects, no small advantage, they usually rely heavily on predictable diction and attitudes. The domesticated confessional and quasi-surreal modes may be regarded as the personal and impersonal poles of the workshop lyric. The regional-pastoral poem can often be assimilated to one mode or the other. Some poets have worked in all three genres; others, like Richard Hugo, have sometimes mingled the modes in the same poem.

3. The workshop lyric differs significantly from the traditional lyric. The traditional lyric, such as "O western wind" or Housman's "Loveliest of trees," tends toward the concentrated expression of one emotion, usually with an anonymous speaker. The workshop lyric presents a more diffuse experi-

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ence deflected through a speaker whom the reader is encouraged to identify with the author of the poem.

4. The workshop lyric is usually written in free verse. The question of free verse or meter, always seen as competitive and exclusionary alternatives, occupies an importance for workshop lyricists which outsiders find difficult to understand.

5. In theory, the workshop aesthetic pays homage to Ezra Pound's injunction to write "in the sequence of the musical phrase." In practice, workshop lyrics rarely contain musical phrases. Still less is a workshop lyric composed of a unified sequence of musical phrases, as in the work of Pound and other great free verse poets. Despite the proliferation of poetry readings, workshop lyricists seldom write for the ear. When alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme are used, they are usually used awkwardly.

6. The basic tools of a workshop lyricist are the stanza, the sentence or sentence fragment, the line break, and the image. Lines are usually shorter than pentameter. Particularly favored forms of the image are the simile and the "adjective noun of noun" phrase, *e.g.*, the "dim lands of peace" decried many years ago by Pound (and more recently by Jonathan Holden).

7. The workshop aesthetic pays little attention to stance, tone, diction, idiom, texture, flow, or momentum.

8. Although theoretically based on speech rhythms, workshop lyrics contain many phrases that would never be heard in spoken English. Uninterested in exploring the low style and forbidding the high style, the workshop aesthetic favors the middle style. Nonetheless, even the most determinedly plain style poems usually smuggle in elements of the forbidden high style, almost invariably used poorly.

9. The workshop aesthetic is dominated by three terrors: terror of emotion, terror of thought, and terror of language. Emotion is replaced by blandness; thought by self-presentation; and attention is deflected from the poem's language to the poet's "voice," that is to say, the poet's shtick or self-imitation.

10. Traditionally, readers have regarded the qualities of energy, invention, imagination, range and variety as marks of excellence. Workshop lyricists, however, either tend to regard them as actual detriments or do not know how to create works which exhibit them.

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Procedure

The following sections will expand on some of the arguments presented in these ten theses. Obviously the validity of the propositions can only be tested by reading many poems. The poems chosen for discussion are representative of numerous others; their weaknesses are generic even more than individual. Since Paul Breslin has written so well on the quasi-surreal poem in *The Psycho-Political Muse*, I have concentrated on the domesticated confessional mode.

Thought and Self-Presentation

What do I mean by asserting that in the workshop lyric thought is replaced by self-presentation? Consider the following poem:

The Kitten

More amazed than anything
I took the perfectly black
stillborn kitten
with the one large eye
in the center of its small forehead
from the house cat's bed
and buried it in a field
behind the house.

I suppose I could have given it
to a museum,
I could have called the local
newspaper.

But instead I took it out into the field
and opened the earth
and put it back
saying, it was real,
saying, life is infinitely inventive,
saying, what other amazements
lie in the dark seed of the earth, yes,

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I think I did right to go out alone
and give it back peacefully, and cover the place
with the reckless blossoms of weeds.

"The Kitten" is from a Pulitzer Prize-winning volume, Mary Oliver's *American Primitive*, and is one of five poems from that book selected by A. Poulin, Jr., for the fourth edition of his useful anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*. The poem has thus been ratified as, and is presented by Poulin as, representing the best work of its period.

"The Kitten" attempts to use an image to present an idea, one characteristic way of thinking in poetry. In fact, the method of "The Kitten" is rather like William Cullen Bryant's "To a Water Fowl," except that Oliver doesn't explicitly state the moral at the end. The speaker finds a kitten born with one eye in the center of its forehead. She reasons that this freak of nature is part of nature, too ("Life is infinitely inventive"; "what other amazements / lie in the dark seed of the earth"). By accepting the one-eyed cat as part of nature, the speaker acts in harmony with nature.

But something is wrong here. The poet is trying to argue through imagery, but her image completely contradicts the moral she draws from it. Live and let live, the poem wants to say; freaks are natural too. However, the kitten is "stillborn." The one-eyed cat cannot live. The image points to the opposite moral: freaks literally are not viable. Nature is ruthless to those who are different.

The interesting question is why Oliver doesn't recognize this. The seventeenth century encouraged the logical development of an image; the workshop lyric, however, encourages self-presentation, with the emphasis less on "what happened" than on "how I was affected by it." The workshop lyric often reveals the poet expecting to be congratulated for performing an ordinary task—in this case, burying a dead cat. The speaker retraces each step of her moral dilemma: "I suppose I could have . . ." "I could have . . ." "But instead I. . . ." Significantly, she does not conclude "I did right" but rather "I think I did right." The self-presentation is that the speaker wants the reader's approval for having done right. If one were reading this poem to an audience, there might well be a nod or two at

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"I think I did right." The reader or listener is asked to complete the poem by saying to the speaker something like, "Yes, you are a modest, sensitive person who knows how to live in harmony with nature." Poems with pastoral settings often make this kind of request.

The language of the poem is undistinguished. Lines four, five, six and eight all begin with prepositional phrases; line five consists of two prepositional phrases, and line seven, the only one of five consecutive lines not to begin with a preposition, also contains a prepositional phrase. Since no effect of litany is intended, nor would it be appropriate, the string of prepositional phrases simply chops up the lines and drains energy and momentum from the first stanza.

The speaker seems to confuse museums with carnival sideshows. A natural history museum would not be interested in a dead cat. The word "museum" is in the poem, along with "newspaper," to contrast with the words Oliver draws from the pastoral treasury: "field," "earth," "dark," "seed." Sometimes these words can be used meaningfully; here, they are stock phrases used for their familiar associations. A poet attempting sustained thought through verse would seek to exclude such clichés; Oliver, unconsciously slipping into the lyric of self-presentation, garlands the "I" with them.

As the writing becomes slacker, the tone becomes more elevated, or vice versa. Most "plain style" poets have a suppressed fondness for elevated language. Or rather, a not quite suppressed fondness which the poet feels free to indulge precisely because he or she is committed to the plain style. Thus the triple repetition of "saying"—here the effect of litany is intended—the abstraction "life is infinitely inventive," the oratorical "yes." The "adjective noun of noun" phrase which concludes the poem ("reckless blossoms of weeds") is another substitute for heightened language which poets of the supposedly plain style agree not to recognize as such. The point is not that poets shouldn't use heightened language; rather, Oliver, in this a representative poet of her era, here uses elevated language poorly because she is working from an aesthetic which refuses to admit that elevated language can be desirable.

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The Traditional Lyric

To examine the differences between the workshop lyric and the traditional lyric, it is helpful to look at a poem many readers would select as an outstanding lyric, Robert Frost's "To Earthward":

To Earthward

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things,
The flow of—was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Down hill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

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The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.

The following comments will emphasize those elements equally available to a poet working in free verse. Since "To Earthward" is such a familiar poem, it may be difficult to recognize how phenomenal Frost's command of technique is. Imagine a poem, in meter or free verse, beginning with 35 monosyllabic words, and then imagine that poem as mellifluous as any in the language. Then imagine the poem making sense. The poem moves as one complete rhythmic unit, unlike any other poem discussed in this essay. Within this overarching rhythm is a perfect balance of end-stopped and enjambed lines. The poem speeds up with lightly accented lines—"the petal of the rose / It was that stung"—and slows down with heavy accents and sounds difficult to pronounce in sequence—"Now no joy but lacks salt." A musician would properly call this rubato. In all the monosyllables the word "weariness" particularly makes its mark. "To Earthward" fulfills the highest ideal of organic form: nothing in it could be changed without weakening the poem.

The poem combines such abstractions as "love," "joy," and "pain," all of which pull their weight, with strong appeals to the senses: the smell of musk, the dew from the honeysuckle, the sweet of bitter bark and burning clove, the hand pressed hard against the earth. "The sweet of bitter bark" seems so vivid that one is surprised to notice that the phrase is an oxymoron. Among the many felicities of diction are "love at the lips," "crossed," "swirl and ache," "dashed," and the inspired "aftermark." Notice, too, how Frost effectively lightens the tone in the third stanza with the rhyme "honeysuckle/knuckle."

Along with, and by means of, the unifying rhythm (not the same thing as the iambic meter), the music, the imagery, and the choice of diction, the poem presents an argument about human experience. The lyric, to use Allen Hoey's interesting definition, presents argument through imagery. Here the argument presents innocent love and its attendant agonies, which lead to a more experienced and embittered kind of love with

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"stronger sweets," which in turn lead to a simultaneously weary and voluptuous yearning for death.

Frost's use of the first-person narrative convention contrasts strongly with Oliver's use in "The Kitten." The "I" in "To Earthward" is anonymous. For all the sense imagery, the speaker is not located in one time or place. We cannot even be sure that the speaker is male. Conceivably the speaker is Frost himself, attempting to make sense of some of his experiences. However, Frost does not encourage the reader to make that identification, or to make any identification of the speaker. Instead, Frost concentrates on making clear to the reader the dimensions of the experience in question, with all the balancing and conflicting desires and pains. Frost wants the reader to respond to the poem, not to the persona, and therein lies one of the major differences between the traditional lyric and the workshop lyric.

The Workshop Line/Break

One special technique of workshop poetry which can be taught to even the dullest student is the workshop line/break, as ubiquitous in the minor poetry of the 1970s and 1980s as the pun was in the minor poetry of the 1950s. One example will serve for thousands. Here are the first three stanzas of Philip Booth's "A Late Spring: Eastport," taken from *Relations*, Booth's selected poems:

> On the far side
> of the storm
> window, as close
>
> as a tree
> might grow to
> a house,
>
> beads of rain
> hang cold
> on the lilac:

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The first two lines tell us that something is happening "On the far side / of the storm." Then we drop down to the next line and see that it's really happening "On the far side / of the storm / window." The techniques a poet uses concentrate the reader's attention on particular elements of a poem. Since it interrupts the flow of the poem, the workshop line/break calls a great deal of attention to itself. If the lines are as short as these, the break acquires even more emphasis. When the poet insists on calling attention to the "storm / window," he as much as tells us that nothing of any consequence is taking place on the far side of the storm window, but that he wants us to notice the clever way he broke the line. And we do. Very occasionally, say once in a hundred times, the device can be used for expressive purposes. This particular example occurs at the beginning of a poem. The line break can't possibly work in context because as yet the poet hasn't established a context.

This kind of line break derives from William Carlos Williams, who broke lines in unusual places to create meaning from typographical arrangement. Hugh Kenner brilliantly analyzes the process in *A Homemade World*. By now, the unusual line break has been institutionalized, especially the particular kind Booth uses in this poem. Williams uses sequences of words which would have no poetic meaning without their particular typography ("The Red Wheelbarrow" is an obvious example). On the contrary, kicking "window" up to the second line of Booth's poem improves the coherence and flow of the poem. Use of the workshop line/break is, more than anything else, a kind of old-school tie, showing that the author has mastered the most up-to-date (which means, as usual, hopelessly dated) technique.

Flow and Momentum

It's difficult to demonstrate the flow of a poem, or the choppiness of a poor poem, without reading aloud to an audience. Considerations of space also limit the possibilities. However, I'll make an attempt, asking the reader to read the selections out loud a couple of times before reading my comments. In *The Triggering Town* Richard Hugo gives examples of student writing and makes up some other examples, then discusses possible improvements to the writing:

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But no one comes
and the girl disappears behind folding doors
while the bus grinds and lurches away.

No one comes.
The girl disappears behind folding doors.
The bus grinds and lurches away.

In St. Ignatius the swallows hit
the dead end of the sky
then turn on themselves. Indians
thanked the church long ago
and changed into trees. Boys are tired
of fishing and throw a dog off the bridge.

Swallows hit
the dead end of sky in St. Ignatius
then turn on themselves. Long ago
Indians thanked the church
and changed into trees. Tired of fishing
boys throw a dog off the bridge.

I'll ignore the quality of the writing except as it involves rhythm, flow, and momentum. The first selection, beginning "But no one comes," flows more smoothly than the second selection, which begins "No one comes." The second selection is choppier, with full stops at the end of each line and no momentum carrying the reader from line to line. This second selection would be effective if the poet were trying to convey a feeling of enervation, in which case the choppy, disjointed rhythm would imitate the emotion being described. Otherwise, the first selection, though unimpressive, is more successful rhythmically.

The first sentence of the third example ("In St. Ignatius") is similarly more successful than the first sentence of the fourth example ("Swallows hit"). "Swallows hit" may be intended to mimic the action it describes, but it is so out of place with the rest of the lines that the effect calls far too much attention to itself. The rhythm of "Swallows hit" has no relationship to the rhythms of the other lines. "The dead end of the sky" flows much better than "the dead end of sky," which once again is our old friend the "adjective noun of noun" phrase. "In St. Igna-

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tius" is awkwardly placed in the fourth example, which also weakens the rhythm. The last sentence is superior in the fourth example, since "Boys are tired / of fishing and throw a dog off the bridge" tends to bury an effective moment.

Is it obvious that the first and third examples were the student writing and the second and fourth examples were Hugo's proposed revisions? We shouldn't be surprised, when so many poets today publish work that shows no understanding of free verse rhythms. Chances are that the poet's teacher didn't understand free verse rhythms either. After all, Hugo chose these particular examples to illustrate how to revise a poem. The frightening thought is that the teacher may be weakening the poems of students who have already grasped something about flow, momentum, and rhythm, but assume that their teacher knows better.

Tone and Stance

Stance may be defined as the author's attitude toward the subject and the author's attitude toward the reader. Problems of tone and stance are frequently interdependent. If the author misjudges the appropriate attitude toward subject or reader, chances are the tone will be wrong, too. On the other hand, if the author misjudges the tone in the poem, the stance will probably be thrown out of kilter. Considerations of tone and stance are ordinarily absent from workshop poetry. A specific example will help focus the argument:

The Routine Things Around the House

When mother died
I thought: now I'll have a death poem.
That was unforgivable

yet I've since forgiven myself
as sons are able to do
who've been loved by their mothers.

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I stared into the coffin
knowing how long she'd live,
how many lifetimes there are

in the sweet revisions of memory.
It's hard to know exactly
how we ease ourselves back from sadness,

but I remembered when I was twelve,
1951, before the world
unbuttoned its blouse.

I had asked my mother (I was trembling)
if I could see her breasts
and she took me into her room

without embarrassment or coyness
and I stared at them,
afraid to ask for more.

Now, years later, someone tells me
Cancers who've never had mother love
are doomed and I, a Cancer,

feel blessed again. What luck
to have had a mother
who showed me her breasts

when girls my age were developing
their separate countries,
what luck

she didn't doom me
with too much or too little.
Had I asked to touch,

perhaps to suck them,
what would she have done?
Mother, dead woman

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who I think permits me
to love women easily,
this poem

is dedicated to where
we stopped, to the incompleteness
that was sufficient

and to how you buttoned up,
began doing the routine things
around the house.

Jonathan Holden singled out this Stephen Dunn poem for praise in *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry*, stating that the poem's dialectic "dramatizes the redemptive power of imagination, of achieved poetic form." My own view is rather different.

Dunn employs a rhetoric of sincerity, which leads to quite different results than if he had employed a rhetoric of plausibility. A poet accustomed to writing narrative or dramatic poetry would recognize that the essential problem is to make credible a not very believable situation, the mother showing the twelve-year-old son her breasts. To make this episode plausible, and neither embarrassing nor silly, the poet must control the tone so that no choice of diction detracts from the reader's suspension of disbelief. The rhetoric of sincerity recognizes no such difficulties. According to this rhetoric, the poet's one task is to sound sincere, which he can best do by following whatever impulse he likes. If he wants to mention serious matters, he will; if he wants to crack jokes, he will. The central episode will be believable because the speaker is talking about it. "Sincerity" also excuses any of the poet's technical shortcomings. With such a burden of sincerity to convey, the poet cannot concern himself with technical matters. As Samuel Goldwyn reportedly said, "The secret of acting is honesty. Once you've learned to fake that, you're in."

Dunn immediately has problems with tone. The phrase "a death poem" may be logically parallel to "a love poem" or "a war poem," but it is unidiomatic to the point of unintentional humor. Ordinarily when someone announces he has done

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something unforgivable, we expect he will not only rapidly forgive himself, but will also expect us to do the same. Omitting "That was unforgivable" would open the speaker to the possibility that the reader would indeed find his behavior unforgivable. To the "sincere" poet, being "unforgivable" may be merely another bid for attention.

The scene at the coffin lacks immediacy, and the poet, trying to heighten the language a bit, reaches for an "adjective noun of noun" phrase ("the sweet revisions of memory"). The reference to 1951 is meant as a guarantee of sincerity: this really happened in 1951. 1951 was "before the world / unbuttoned its blouse." Apparently this is intended as wit. A poet using the rhetoric of plausibility would know that just before the crucial scene is no place for this kind of "wit."

The big scene itself is poorly done. The broken-backed lines "and she took me into her room / without embarrassment or coyness / and I stared at them" are rhythmically inert. "Afraid to ask for more" isn't very convincing, partly because the poet hasn't imagined what it is like to be twelve years old. The scene is viewed only from an adult perspective. The lines about astrology continue to trivialize the subject. Most poems about the death of a parent are not this giggly. The speaker is not only more honest than thou, more daring than thou, and more Oedipal than thou, but also cuter than thou.

Is the pun on "cunt" in the phrase "when girls were developing / their separate countries" intentional? If not, the poet is guilty of ignorance for not recognizing the probable association with Hamlet's "country matters," especially after the extended discussion of breasts and sexual development. If the pun is intended, as it probably is, then the poet is guilty of incompetence for not recognizing that such a phrase would be ludicrous anywhere, let alone in a poem ostensibly about the death of a mother. In fact—and such is the fate of the "sincere" poet—the strongest emotion shown in the poem is self-regard. Mother, death, breasts, astrology, girls, all prove equally good fodder for the devouring ego.

Once again Dunn violates plausibility by asking what would have happened if the boy had asked to touch or suck the breasts. Neither event could have happened unless the mother had been psychotic or feeble-minded, as does not appear to be

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the case. At the conclusion of the poem Dunn, like Oliver in "The Kitten," turns on the kind of heightened language that plain style poets ostensibly don't use. The use of apostrophe here is exactly as in a nineteenth-century poem, only less convincing. "Mother, dead woman / who I think permits me / to love women easily" is completely remote from speech rhythms. "Dead woman" is rhetorical in the pejorative sense, and "who I think permits me" is quite clumsy. This highfalutin use of apostrophe scarcely goes with the jokiness of much of the poem, but by now the reader doesn't expect coherence of language. As André Gide said, one cannot both be sincere and seem so.

On the other hand, consider this poem, also by Dunn:

Long Term

On this they were in agreement:
everything that can happen between two people
happens after a while

or has been thought about so hard
there's almost no difference
between desire and deed.

Each day they stayed together, therefore,
was a day of forgiveness, tacit,
no reason to say the words.

It was easy to forgive, so much harder
to be forgiven. The forgiven had to agree
to eat dust in the house of the noble

and both knew this couldn't go on for long.
The forgiven would need to rise;
the forgiver need to remember the cruelty

in being correct.
Which is why, except in crises,
they spoke about the garden,

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what happened at work,
the little ailments and aches
their familiar bodies separately felt.

Here the poet successfully maintains a serious tone. The one attempt at varying the tone—"The forgiven had to agree / to eat dust in the house of the noble"—fails, though not, as in the other poem, disastrously. Dunn cannot, at this stage of his career, shift momentarily to a more humorous tone, as a poet like Elizabeth Bishop does, or as Frost briefly lightens the tone in "To Earthward" with the "honeysuckle / knuckle" rhyme. Apart from this minor flaw, Dunn sustains the serious tone appropriate to his subject and handles a colorless abstract diction ("agreement," "forgiveness," "cruelty") with real tact. The logical connectors ("Therefore," "which is why") make logical connections. The occasional unobtrusive elevation of language (the omission of "would" in "the forgiven need to remember" and the placing of "separately" in the last line, for instance) fits well with such colloquialisms as "there's almost no difference." Lines five and six do read like chopped-up prose; the choice of stanza seems arbitrary.

The stance could not be more removed from "The Routine Things Around the House," which insisted on its speaker's daring and sincerity. The speaker of "Long Term" has no need to insist, since he impresses the reader by his knowledge of the subject. The reader concentrates on what is said about long-term relationships, not on the would-be cleverness of the speaker (or author). Is the poem based on the author's personal experience or on the author's observation and imagination? The poem is plausible; that is all the reader needs to know. Poets who write badly on one occasion may write very well on another occasion, and vice versa. Choice of stance, rhetoric, and convention plays a significant role in such variations in quality.

Epistemological Caution

A number of influences have converged in contemporary American poetry to produce an attitude of epistemological caution. One important influence has been Eastern religious

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thought, with its emphasis on "being here now" in the present moment. Poetry influenced by this kind of thinking frequently offers simple descriptions. Confessional poetry, domesticated or otherwise, also implies a limited epistemology: what can I know except my present feelings and my memories of the past? The pervasive influence of Frank O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems, especially "The Day Lady Died," leads to a similar limitation of authorial claims to knowledge. Few poets have had any use for O'Hara's energy, invention, or elegance, but many have thought that the equivalent of "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday" was an easy formula for spontaneity.

The conventions of present-tense narration in the first (and, alas, the second) person are often used, both deliberately and unwittingly, to the same effect. The present progressive tense has been used by so many mediocre writers to show that "I am writing this poem right / now" that good poems probably cannot be written in the present progressive tense for the next twenty years. The present tense can be used for dramatic irony, as Jonathan Holden has pointed out; Philip Booth's fine poem "Stove," for instance, contrasts the child's understanding with the adult understanding of author and reader. More often, however, the present tense is used to convey a wished-for sense of immediacy.

An amusing indication of the prevalence of the "This is happening now" attitude is the extreme fondness for gerund titles, as Jack Butler was the first to point out. Even the archenemy of the McPoem, Donald Hall, called a volume *Kicking the Leaves*. Gerund titles come in three basic types: the ordinary event inflated in importance (*Eating the Lunch*), the clever non sequitur (*Eating the Ocean*), and the pretentious profundity (*Eating the Silence*).

Still another source of epistemological caution is the preferred writing style of the academy. Had Robert Burns been an American academic, he would have written "My love is not altogether unlike a generally red rose." To assert that one's love is like a rose is to make an epistemologically dubious statement. To speculate that one's love might in some regards, considered from certain aspects, be compared to a rose is to preserve epistemological modesty. Thus poets use phrases like "must

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have seen" rather than an unconditional "saw" or ask rhetorical questions.

Suppose a poet wanted to write about his uncle, who fought in the German military during World War II. He might decide to use the dramatic monologue. But to write a dramatic monologue is to claim to follow the thought process of another person. Our poet could write as an omniscient narrator, but that would be to make even larger claims. Perhaps he could use the limited omniscient perspective, keeping inside the uncle's point of view. William Heyen did none of these in "For Wilhelm Heyen" from *The Swastika Poems* (a volume later revised and expanded as *Erika*). Instead, he chose a characteristic genre of his generation, the "I am looking at this photograph" poem:

> The shaft of the film curls with smoke.
> Within the camera's depth of field:
>
> battalions of bone-white crosses
> (the lines of a chaplain's gestures
>
> in a pre-battle benediction)
> and a still-living soldier
>
> fronting them, and staring
> into my eyes, into the dark. He waves.
>
> The soldier moves his right arm.
> This is, and was, certain in time.
>
> 11. 1-10

The "I am looking at this photograph" poem maintains epistemological security by limiting the content to what the narrator can describe or guess about the subject of the photograph. Heyen's devices for moving beyond the description of this opening passage are the usual ones of the genre, speculation ("I'll say you walked with soldiers, / killed, were killed," 11. 23-24) and apostrophe ("rest, my twenty-year-old uncle, rest," 1. 22). This clumsy combination of apostrophe and exposition is par for the genre. The genre easily turns self-regarding ("You cannot hear / your nephew try to understand

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your name," 11. 32-33). The final assertion of epistemological untruth ("I've seen you move your arm," 1. 34) is so predictable that it reinforces rather than contradicts the observance of convention. In effect, Heyen uses, or falls into, conventions which allow him not to have to imagine his uncle's experiences. Epistemological caution sometimes ends up looking like lack of imagination.

Conclusion

Caution, complacency, self-regard, technical inadequacy: these terms characterize most American poetry of the last quarter century. Fear of imagination. Given the favored conventions, what else could one expect? A poet's talent scarcely matters if the conventions adopted or available thwart the possibility of significant poetry. A mere shift of outward substance—free verse to meter, lyric to narrative—would effect little improvement. The workshop narrative, the workshop monologue, and the workshop sonnet are possibilities just as gruesome as the workshop lyric.

Some fruitful topics for investigation lie outside the scope of this essay: the workshop lyric's connection with what Christopher Lasch has called the culture of narcissism; the social structures which support the workshop lyric, such as the academic's imperative need to publish, leading to self-imitation; and the difficulty young poets face in rebelling against those elders who may have some power to determine their economic futures. However, I will briefly address two further questions: where did the workshop lyric come from, and what is the antidote to it?

Seven poets who have significantly influenced the form are Robert Bly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin, William Stafford, Richard Hugo, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. I don't wish to blame any of these poets for the weakness of their imitators, but simply to point out how often they have been imitated. I share the common judgment that Plath and Wright are the best of these writers, and Hugo the worst. The energy of Plath and Sexton and the rhythmic vitality of the best Plath form no part of the workshop aesthetic—energy is the quality most antithetical to it—but their disjointed style, simile-making, and empha-

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sis on the self have been very influential. Stafford has been idolized by many regional-pastoral poets, and Merwin has been equally important in the quasi-surreal mode. Hugo's "you" poems have been imitated by many poets.

Bly, with *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, and Wright, with *Shall We Gather at the River*, seem in retrospect to be the founding fathers of the workshop lyric. When Bly and Wright broke violently with the academic style of the 1950s, they certainly had no intention of creating the academic style of the 1970s and 1980s. However, one reason these poems have been frequently imitated is that many of them are so formulaic and rhythmically slack that they are easy for students to copy. Wright's best work in *The Branch Will Not Break* generally lies outside the stylistic and imaginative limitations of the workshop lyric. But consider "Late November in a Field" from *Shall We Gather at the River*, also anthologized by Poulin:

> Today I am walking alone in a bare place,
> And winter is here.
> Two squirrels near a fence post
> Are helping each other drag a branch
> Toward a hiding place; it must be somewhere
> Behind those ash trees.
> They are still alive, they ought to save acorns
> Against the cold.
> Frail paws rifle the troughs between cornstalks
> when the moon
> Is looking away.
> The earth is hard now,
> The soles of my shoes need repairs.
> I have nothing to ask a blessing for,
> Except these words.
> I wish they were
> Grass.

Can this poem be by the author of "A Blessing"? The easy reference here to "a blessing" makes matters even worse. The poem could have come from a recent M.F.A. thesis, but instead the imitator is Wright himself. Here is a quasi-surreal poem in a regional-pastoral setting, complete with present progressive tense. The studiedly simple diction ("winter is here," "the earth

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is hard now") becomes falsely naive. Who is the speaker of the poem? "The soles of my shoes need repair" suggests the speaker may be a peasant or a tramp, but nothing else in the poem supports this reading. A poor man would undoubtedly prefer food to grass. The opening line is not idiomatic spoken English, let alone that of a poor man. No one in real life would say, "I am walking alone in a bare place." The closest analogy is to someone telling a dream, although even then "I'm" would be likelier that "I am" and "barren" likelier than "bare." The phrase "walking alone in a bare place" could work, but only in a poem where the convention of diction was more elevated. Preferring the inanimate to the animate was a cliché of the period, and the ending is badly dated. With the final portentous line break ("I wish they were / Grass") the poem topples completely into bathos.

What antidotes exist to the workshop aesthetic, especially if a poet like James Wright can fall into it unthinkingly? First, and simplest, a writer can eliminate such obvious clichés as the workshop line/break and the "adjective noun of noun" phrase. Second, the writer can identify and study poems which use elevated language well. That can only occur after a poet has learned to recognize different levels of diction, which many poets today cannot do. The poet can examine the poem as it is being written and as it exists in draft to identify problems of stance. The poet can reject epistemological caution and attempt work that goes beyond memory and immediate sense impression. The poet can read widely, and not primarily in the works of living authors. Almost any poet would learn something about flow by reading aloud a poem by Marvell, then a poem of the author's own, then a poem by Whitman or Pound or Wordsworth. The poet can learn to distinguish conventions of individual poems and of types of poems, and can learn to use them wisely and to invent further conventions.

The poet who writes in English has the unmatched gift of a huge vocabulary and a rich literature. The poet who begins the lifelong process of understanding and using this inheritance, which will require as much passion, intelligence, and imagination as the writer can muster, will have little use for the most familiar varieties of American poetry written in the past quarter century.

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Actors Theatre of Louisville

NO THEATRE HAS EVER ACHIEVED MAJOR STATUS without doing original plays. Regional theatre in America, however, has been disappointingly conservative in this regard, sticking to standard works and recent New York hits. "Regional playwright" is practically a contradiction in terms in the United States, but until we get some, our regional theatres will remain mere adjuncts to New York City.

A striking exception to the rule of regional conservatism is the Actors Theatre of Louisville, which has done more in the past decade and a half to develop American playwriting than any other theatre company. Since 1976, its annual Humana Festival has produced 150 new American plays by 117 playwrights, who include well-known writers like Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Joyce Carol Oates, Romulus Linney, Lee Blessing, Horton Foote, John Patrick Shanley, and Arthur Kopit, plus dozens of lesser-knowns, many of whom received their first opportunities with ATL. In a reverse of the usual pattern, some plays have even gone on to be produced in New York, including Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God.*

Louisville is a typically dull Midwestern town, known previously for the manufacture of baseball bats and Bourbon whiskey, and for the Kentucky Derby. The downtown area, where the theatre is located, has been spruced up in recent years, but remains a sterile land of scattered high-rise hotels, office buildings (deserted at night, of course), parking lots, and strip joints. That a major American theatre company should spring from such unlikely soil is a tribute to Jon Jory, producing director since 1969, whose energy and intelligence are in evidence throughout the operation. Producing new plays requires far more than the attitude usually heard, that "When a good play comes along, we'll certainly do it." It takes fundraising specifically for new plays; promotion among both audiences and potential playwrights; an orderly system for soliciting, evaluating, and finally selecting scripts; and a commitment to regular productions, come Hell or high water. Jory and his staff have been able to get sponsorship for the New Play Festival from Louisville's Humana Corporation (the theatre also has hundreds of other donors). The Festival is widely advertised nationally, receiving some 2,200 scripts annually; there is a literary department of four staff members and two interns for evaluating them, which is practically unprecedented in this country, where theatres will spend money on almost anything before literature. Finally, the Festival produces six to eight new full-length plays selected or commissioned each year, plus numerous short plays.

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A commitment to producing new plays means that, inevitably, some weak ones will be done, which was certainly the case this past spring when I attended. A preference for well-known, safe titles is the reason that most of our regional theatres avoid original works. But what kind of film industry would we have in this country if the studios produced no new films, but only re-released the old ones? What kind of book industry, if all novels were reprints? Nor is it correct to assume that audiences are afraid of taking risks themselves; if that were true, all the movie theatres in the country would be closed, because of the cheap availability of videotapes, and Dover reprints would have a corner on the book market.

The 1990 Festival consisted of seven plays that reflect the state of American playwriting today. Character study was the main emphasis; social or political commentary were rare, as was poetic sensibility; plot was usually haphazard. The playwrights did not limit themselves to realism—there was even a play about a woman seduced by a swan—but settings were mostly contemporary, the dialogue mostly ordinary speech, the characters mostly everyday American types.

Zara Spook and Other Lures, by Joan Ackermann-Blount, deals with two women in a fishing tournament. (A Zara Spook is a fishing lure.) One is ardently pursued by her boyfriend, who is desperate to marry her; the other is similarly pursued by her estranged husband, who expresses his love by taking pot shots at her with a rifle. After a series of hectic incidents—one woman catches a prize fish while a thunderstorm threatens, the other gets bitten by a snake, a friend has an asthma attack—the two couples, unsurprisingly, get together. The play is like a good television situation comedy, with amusing but aimless dialogue, funny but random incidents, and sharply defined but flat characters. These last are necessitated by the ongoing nature of a television series, which may have many different writers; the stability of the characters, who are carefully defined in a written "treatment," is the basis for the show. TV characters never surprise us; in fact, their predictable behavior is part of the fun. In the better shows like "M.A.S.H." or "Cheers," the quick pace and inventiveness maintain our interest, so that the characters are like the colored chips in a kaleidoscope, interacting with one another and their environment in endlessly new ways. In the weaker shows, the action is so slow and predictable that only certified television addicts can bear to watch.

Ackermann-Blount keeps the kaleidoscope turning in her play. There are many funny lines, as when the boyfriend is accused of making his girlfriend pregnant "behind her back" in order to get her to marry him, and the incidents have a delightfully zany quality. The acting was relaxed and congenial, with especially good performances from V Craig Heidenreich as the brooding husband, and the playwright herself as the asthma victim. But ultimately, sacrificing plot for clever one-liners and offbeat occurrences keeps the play from affecting us very deeply. A pivotal character is the girlfriend. In the opening scene, she gets dressed in front of her boyfriend, who has

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just spent the night with her, under her nightgown. "Are you going to get dressed like that after we are married?" he asks, disappointed. The line got a laugh, but the implications of her inhibition were never followed up. She doesn't seem to like her boyfriend very much—everything he does annoys her—so that we can hardly be pleased to see her marry him. Nor is she all that obsessed with fishing per se, though she enjoys the tournament and is delighted to win the "rookie of the year" award; it seems a mere diversion for her. The girlfriend just drifts through the play, lacking *objectives*, which for Stanislavski were the building blocks of plot; without strong objectives, characters can never captivate or provoke us, no matter how amusing they may be from moment to moment.

Jane Martin's *Vital Signs* was another plotless piece. Like her well-known *Talking With*, which premiered at ATL in 1981, it is a collection of monologues for women. (Two male actors appear mostly as foils, though they do get a duologue of their own near the end.) Less feminist than *Talking With*, Martin's new play depicts a series of offbeat, anxiety-ridden characters, including a disillusioned New Age type ("Don't take up a religion you can't spell"), a Lotto winner, a former waitress at an all-nude truckstop, a lesbian trick-shot artist, and an abused wife who killed her husband. Although superbly acted by its cast of eight, who found endless variations and contrasts not only from one characterization to the next, but *within* each characterization, *Vital Signs* nonetheless came off as a heavy, obvious, stereotypical piece, a random series of cartoons masquerading as a play.

A more ambitious work was Jane Anderson's *The Pink Studio*, dealing with the life and work of Henri Matisse. As the program noted, the scenes are "pure invention," rather than an attempt to depict the painter's life accurately. Anderson's Matisse is a conventional bourgeois, a devoted husband and father who nonetheless has an affair with his model. His wife finds out about it, kicks the girl out, and has a bit of a fling herself with a famous *couturier*. Husband and wife become reconciled, and apparently live happily ever after.

More interesting than this simple tale of mid-life crisis was the way that each scene of the play was related to one of Matisse's actual paintings, which were projected on large screens around the theatre. Thus, when Matisse's wife resisted his attempt to draw her in the nude, he shifted his attention to a blue vase, which became part of his painting, *The Pink Studio*, which we then saw. Although the play was performed in a tiny, 159-seat theatre, the visual effects throughout were glorious. Scenic Designer Paul Owen and Props Master Mark Bissonnette achieved wonders through carefully selected furniture and properties, and small but evocative set pieces, like the pale blue window of a hotel room in Nice. Michael Krass's beautiful 1910 costumes, and Victor En Yu Tan's subtle, atmospheric lighting (no mean feat on a tiny thrust stage with the audience very close) were also splendid.

Ultimately, however, the script is not up to its ambitious concept.

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The dialogue is flat and undistinctive, and the implicit aesthetic theory is simple-minded. Things and people catch Matisse's eye from time to time, and he paints them. He seems to be going through life like a tourist, with canvas and palette rather than a Kodak. The theories of art that were passionately debated in the early twentieth century are nowhere in evidence. In each case, the painting itself does not seem to interest Matisse, but only the subject, which is the opposite of the way the real Matisse would have viewed it. For a painter, the subject is of course important, but as a means to an end, as a *stimulus* for the art work; the painting does not "capture" the subject, but instead grows from it. In the creative process, interest shifts from the initial stimulus to the work itself, which is why a painting can end up looking very different from its subject and still be a fine work of art. The creative dialogue is not between the artist and the subject, but between the artist and the evolving art work.

The creative process is not easy to depict in literature. Nonetheless, many twentieth-century writers have done it better than Anderson, one example being Joyce Cary in the novel, *The Horse's Mouth*. In *The Pink Studio*, the emphasis is on the mundane life of the artist, the way he has the same kind of personal problems the rest of us do, a valid if not particularly original insight. But the insight has no value unless the writer can convince us that her protagonist *is* an artist, and not just a FAX machine.

Romulus Linney's *2* is a striking play about the trial of Hermann Goering at Nuremberg. Set in an anteroom where Goering meets with his lawyer, it depicts the man as brilliant, charming, manipulative, and ultimately mysterious. Goering was in many ways the strangest figure in the Nazi movement. A genuine war hero, an ace flier, he joined the party in the early twenties apparently as an opportunist; his patriotism and admiration for Hitler were real enough, but there is no evidence that he had any interest in Nazi ideology. Accused of persecuting Jews—he actually wrote the Nuremberg laws that took away their civil rights—he maintains that he never hated them and actually saved some Jewish friends. When it is noted that he created the concentration camps, he maintains that others took them over and ran them, and that besides, he was merely operating on the model of the British in South Africa in the Boer War. Accused of mass bombing of civilians, he points out—accurately—that the British bombed Berlin first, and that his bombings were paltry in comparison with Allied raids on Hamburg, Dresden, or Hiroshima. Always, he blames historical circumstances, military necessity, or plain lack of knowledge, for any evil that happened.

Despite mounting evidence of Nazi atrocities, Goering stays aloof and proud, refusing to defame Hitler (though Hitler had tried to have him killed at the end of the war, along with his wife and children), and taking the blame for all his own actions. The title of the play refers to the fact that Goering was the number 2 man in Germany. "Why didn't number 2 ever say no to number 1?" asks the

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British prosecutor at the trial. Goering can only shrug. How could a man who was a hero and a patriot, a connoisseur of art, a lover of nature, a good father and husband, commit such horrors? His life is as much an enigma to him as it is to us.

William Duff-Griffin gave a bravura performance in the lead, capturing the swagger and energy, the peculiar set of the mouth, and the graceful movements that Goering had despite his bulk. Duff-Griffin's energy, charm, resonant voice, and imagination were compelling. Unfortunately, the rest of the cast were not up to his level; several were tense and awkward, one actor even blanking on a line during the performance I saw, and not covering it well. Part of the problem, however, is that in its present form, *2* is such a one-character play. Goering's chief antagonist, U. S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, who presided at the trials, is not even seen, although we do occasionally hear his voice. The secondary characters whom we do see—the American Commandant, a psychologist, two guards, a defense counselor—have differing attitudes toward Goering, but are hardly more than foils. Their lives will not change if he is convicted, nor if he is acquitted. When Goering commits suicide, thus cheating the hangman, the play ends, since no aftermath could interest us very much. But Linney and Duff-Griffin have created a fascinating portrait.

Infinity's House, by Ellen McLaughlin, is set at the same time and deals with the same war as Linney's play, but is far less skillful. It is about the first atomic bomb explosion at Alamogordo in 1945, but also clumsily incorporates flashbacks of some mid-nineteenth-century Western settlers, and some slightly later railroad builders. For some reason, one of the women among the early settlers is mute, but as if to make up for it, most of the other characters are incredibly long-winded, pontificating in an airy, generalized way about the nature of the universe and larger subjects. Robert Oppenheimer and Hans Bethe (played as an elderly man, although he was actually only thirty-nine at the time) discuss Plato and the *Bhavagad Gita*, while specifics about science, war, technology, or history are conspicuous by their scarcity, as are poetic imagery, metaphor, characterization, or plot. Poor acting by many of the same awkward performers from *2* (unfortunately without Duff-Griffin), and an ugly, quasi-realistic setting of the southwestern desert by Paul Owen, combined with the inept script to achieve what I would not have thought possible. *Infinity's House* actually makes the atomic bomb seem dull.

Elizabeth Egloff's *The Swan* was another meager work. The story of a woman seduced by a swan has obvious mythical echoes, and a break from realism is always refreshing in American drama these days. Unfortunately, the dialogue of the play is insipid, the pace slow, and the action confused. The Leda of the piece is a young hospital worker named Dora. One night a swan flies into her window. After she brings it inside to nurse it back to health, it crawls out of its feathers to reveal a naked young man, who is nonetheless still a swan, fluttering madly

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about the room trying to escape. She keeps the swan-man as a pet; eventually they become lovers, and she apparently turns into a swan herself.

Dora also has a boyfriend, a milkman who is married to an "understanding" wife. That is enough of an offbeat idea for a whole play in itself, but it is not developed. We never even see the wife, and the milkman functions only as a chorus, reacting with irritation to Dora's growing swanhood. The joke soon wears thin, and the mythical resonances remain unexplored. Ultimately, this play about a swan turns out to be a play about a swan, period. The one redeeming feature was the outstanding performance by William Youmans as the swan. Thin and angular, Youmans had the gleaming eye and intense focus of a real bird, with wonderfully jerky yet integrated movements, punctuated by moments of brooding stillness. It was, alas, a performance the actor is not likely to repeat, in this play or any other.

The best play of the Festival was actually a double bill, two one-acts by Joyce Carol Oates with the overall title of *In Darkest America.* Best known for her fiction, Oates has written a number of plays, but "In Darkest America" might well describe all her writing, full of brutality and violence and a strange drabness. The first one-act, *Tone Clusters*, was vintage Oates. A middle-aged New Jersey couple are being interviewed on television about their son, who has been accused of the rape, murder, and mutilation of a neighborhood girl. A pompous, unseen interrogator asks them inane questions about crime, religion, predestination, genetics, and American civilization, while slides of their house, its rooms, their son, the girl, and their street are shown on screens around the stage. The ordinariness of the couple, who are mostly bewildered by the questions, is contrasted by the horror of the crime, which they continue to deny, against overwhelming evidence, that their son committed.

The trouble with *Tone Clusters* is that it does not go anywhere. The characters are stereotypical: the son fits the standard profile of such murderers, quiet, a loner, unable to keep a job, etc., while the parents are stupid middle Americans with no insight or sensitivity. It gradually becomes clear that their persistent denial of their son's guilt is the result not of love but of pride, which keeps them distant from us, as objects of ridicule. They know nothing, recognize nothing, learn nothing. We cannot possibly identify with such obtuseness, coming away instead with the feeling that, whatever else, this could never happen to us, which is the opposite of what tragedy is supposed to make us feel.

Oates's second play, *The Eclipse*, was an outstanding piece of writing, beautifully performed. It deals with a thirty-seven-year-old woman, living alone with her apparently senile mother. The mother is a former junior high school science teacher; the daughter is a professor, and a politically active feminist. The intricacies of their relationship are presented with poignancy and humor. Their roles have become reversed, with the mother childlike and dependent; she

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throws a tantrum in the supermarket, steals some items like a naughty child, watches boxing on television with fanatical involvement (an interest she shares with Oates herself, alas, who sometimes writes on boxing), and makes embarrassing phone calls to a social agency claiming she has been abused.

One of the many impressive things about the play is the openness of it; most of the other playwrights in the Festival tend to spell everything out in tedious detail, but Oates keeps you guessing. It is never entirely clear whether the mother's bizarre actions are the result of her mental deficiencies, or are a ploy to get attention, or are part of a fundamental eccentricity that has always been part of her makeup. She has had brain surgery for "capillary angioma"—Oates skillfully holds off this bit of information until near the end of the play, rather than dumping a lot of exposition on us at the beginning—but the operation revealed that she had had two or three such angiomas in her life. In the nineteen-sixties, some rebellious students knocked her down and slashed her; she never got over the incident, and went into retirement. Did the incident cause an angioma, and thus bring on her strange behavior, or is her behavior a defense mechanism resulting from the psychological trauma? Or is she just having fun with her daughter? "Oh, boy, I have my own private black hole!" is how the former science teacher refers to the results of her operation.

The daughter has to go off to a political meeting; unable to find anyone to stay with her mother, she at first leaves her alone, then at the last minute decides not to go, and returns from the airport. Her conflicting obligations, to women in general via her feminist organization, and to this one woman in particular, whom she dearly loves but can't stand to live with, have worn her down. Somewhat drunk, she rails against the world, and we come to see how much she is actually like her mother, with the same obsessiveness and rebelliousness.

The mother, of course, is anything but grateful for her daughter's return, since she is expecting a visit from a suitor, an imaginary, romantic Spaniard, a ridiculous idea that drives her daughter further to distraction. In a final dream sequence, we and the daughter see the mother, looking young and beautiful, dance off with the fellow, an erotic symbol of death, as her life and the play come to an end.

Madeleine Sherwood and Beth Dixon were outstanding as the mother and the daughter, working intimately with each other to give the impression of long familiarity. Sherwood, a veteran actress whose credits go back to the fifties, as Abigail in the original *Crucible* and Sister Woman in the original *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, gave a radiant performance, funny, pungent, and sad all at once. A true actress, she had the ability to seem old and horrible, with her hair shaved close and a huge scar across her head, and then, in the dream sequence, to look positively lovely. This play, and its cast, certainly deserve to go off to New York, or Hollywood, or London, or any place people want to see fine drama.

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BERT CARDULLO

Old Glory

I AM RELUCTANT TO USE THIS COLUMN for a consideration of Kenneth Branagh's film of *Henry V* because I believe, with James Agee, that "the creation of new dramatic poetry is more important than the re-creation of old," and that "for such new poetry, movies offer the richest opportunity since Shakespeare's time."[1] Nevertheless, some remarks are in order about a film based on the work of so "cinematic" a dramatic poet. Let's begin with the play itself: depending on your understanding of history, *Henry V* (1599) is either Granville-Barker's sentimental appeal to patriotism fatally devoid "of some spiritually significant idea," or it is Yeats's tragically ironic treatment of an amiable egotist whose "gross vices" and "coarse nerves" render him capable, finally, of moral evil. To most of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Henry was a great national hero whose exploits of two centuries earlier (he was King of England from 1413 until his death in 1422), depicted onstage, could only fan the patriotic fervor of a generation that had seen the defeat of the Spanish Armada. To Laurence Olivier, directing and starring in the first film version of the play in 1944, Henry was the same national hero leading an outnumbered, underequipped army in the service of a different cause: the rallying of patriotic spirit during England's fight for survival against Nazi Germany. To Kenneth Branagh, directing and starring in the new film version (and in his first film, after much theater work in Britain) in this era of post-empire and relative anti-militarism, Henry is "someone who at times captured a certain fineness of the human spirit, and at other times was a really ruthless bastard. I wanted to get all of that. Shakespeare doesn't apologize for this man—in fact, he is quite uncompromising in the way he presents him."

Branagh is right, and he includes in his film much of the unattractive side of Henry that Olivier understandably had omitted. Unlike Olivier, for example, Branagh does not dilute through comedy the early scene in which the young king seeks tortuous legal justification from two ecclesiastics for the extension of his royal power to certain French duchies and ultimately to the French crown. Olivier's Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of Ely are straight man and clown to Henry's good-natured, gutsy adventurer; Branagh's churchmen

[1] Agee wrote these words in a review for *Time* (April 8, 1946) of Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* (1944).

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are astute politicians looking to protect Church monies and lands from Henry's grasp, even as the King looks to carry out his dying father's advice that he "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels" so as to quiet rebellion at home. One shot epitomizes the relationship between Henry and his prelates: just before deciding to invade France, he is at the center of a tight frame, with Canterbury and Ely in profile, crowding him on either side. Another shot shortly thereafter underscores the inevitability of war, the fact that nothing will get in Henry's way: as he commands that "every man now task his thought, / That this fair action may on foot be brought," the King exits, followed by his lords, by walking directly at the camera. This impetuous movement carries over into Henry's next scene, during which he cunningly and somewhat pleasurably stalks and entraps—literally as well as figuratively—the three English noblemen (one of them his cousin, the Earl of Cambridge) who had taken French gold to assassinate him. Olivier eliminates this scene in addition to two others included by Branagh:[2] Henry's threats to Charles VI of France that "hungry war" will open its "vasty jaws" and leave nothing but "the widows' tears, the orphans' cries, / The dead men's blood, the privy maidens' groans"; and his vicious threats to the Governor of Harfleur to surrender or

> . . . in a moment look to see
> The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
> Defile the locks of your shrill-shriking daughters;
> Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
> And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;
> Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
> .....

So as to remove all taint from the character of his Henry V, Olivier even deletes the King's prayer on the eve of the decisive Battle of Agincourt (1415), in which he asks that God not make him pay this day for his father's usurpation of the crown from Richard II (Henry's father, Bolingbroke, became King Henry IV). But Branagh is right to keep this petition in his film, for it is key to an understanding of the play as Shakespeare wrote it and as it occupies the last slot in the cycle containing *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part One*, and *Henry IV, Part Two*. In these plays, Shakespeare presents a society in transition from the medieval view of the world as a great chain of being, an utterly planned cosmos, under the direction of one God, to the Renaissance and even modern view of the world as a collection of self-serving

[2] Even Branagh, however, stops short of having Henry give his soldiers the strategic order during the Battle of Agincourt to cut their prisoners' throats—an order made all the more chilling by the fact that it *precedes* Henry's discovery of the killing of the boys (who maintain the English baggage train) by the French.

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individuals under the rule of secular—and therefore mutable—law. Divine law, in the form of Richard II's divine mandate, is ruptured when Richard is deposed by Bolingbroke, and the rebellions that follow (predicted by Richard) in both parts of *Henry IV* can be seen as a natural consequence of the break in the venerable structure of authority.

Thus *secular* law reigns at the start of *Henry V*, twisted to the new king's aggressive purposes by divine, and divinely acquisitive, hands. And despite Henry's invocation of the Lord at strategic moments in the drama, indeed, his pairing of God's will with England's destiny, it is secularism that wins the day at Agincourt and continues to do so during the troubled reign of Henry VI, "Whose state so many had the managing, / That they lost France, and made his England bleed." (The infant Henry VI succeeded his father, who died soon after his triumph without ever having truly consolidated his gains in France.) Branagh, in contrast to Olivier, includes these deflating lines by the Chorus at the end of his film—a chorus that has, up to this point, discharged its role as a narrative bridge in confident tones—and his aim in this as well as in his depiction of a complex Henry V could only be to capture Shakespeare's play in all its ambivalence: as a patriotic, even jingoistic paean to King and country, on the one hand, and an ironic, even bitter denunciation of moral and political disorder, on the other. That disorder pervades the three *Henry VI* plays plus *Richard III*, in all of which England continues to suffer retribution for Henry Bolingbroke's overthrow and murder of a rightful monarch, Richard II. In Shakespeare's wishful, Providential scheme, only with the restitution of the legitimate successor at the end of *Richard III*—Henry VII, the first Tudor king—can England enjoy peace and greatness once again. There is but temporary peace at the end of *Henry V*, and the King's newfound greatness will be short-lived.

As a script, then, Branagh's version of *Henry V* succeeds in capturing the essence of Shakespeare's play, of Henry's character—indeed, the film even includes two flashbacks of tavern scenes from *Henry IV, Part Two* in order to suggest the profligacy Prince-Hal-become-King-Henry has left behind as well as the humanity, the fellow-feeling, he has retained from Falstaff's world. But why include these scenes and not others from *Henry IV, Part One* that are equally important to the formation of Henry's character? I'm thinking of those scenes that depict a loveless, morbid, impudent Hotspur obsessed with the achievement of individual glory on the battlefield, a man whose boldness so attracts his enemy, Prince Hal, that the latter is moved to pronounce a benediction over Hotspur's dead body—a benediction that includes the following ill-omened lines:

> Ill-weav'd ambition, how much art thou shrunk!
> When that this body did contain a spirit,
> A kingdom for it was too small a bound,

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> But now two paces of the vilest earth
> Is room enough. . . .

Kenneth Branagh's performance as Henry certainly could have benefited from a few more parts ruthless Hotspur and a few less parts complaisant Falstaff—Branagh tries to project the former quality, especially in moments like the speech before Harfleur, but his doughboy face and woolly voice get in his way. *Selfish* charm is what Henry should exude, but what Branagh can't quite manage and for which there was no room in Olivier's idealized conception of the character.

Patrick Doyle's nearly continuous music helps Branagh with one aspect of his character but not the other, since it emphasizes his alternately sentimental and majestic topside, never his dark underbelly. Kenneth Macmillan's cinematography, by contrast, simultaneously contains both sides of Henry's world: indoors, warm, sepia tones over a palette mainly of browns and blacks and grays; outdoors, for the most part the same narrow range of color embraced by a softening mist, which becomes most prominent where it is most needed—at the brutal Battle of Agincourt, with its clashing swords, whistling arrows, falling horses, and flying bodies. How appropriate that in what would finally be a victory for secularism, Macmillan should keep his camera low to the ground—to the mud and guts—and in fairly close, and at a few points agonizingly extend earthly time by shooting in slow motion. Branagh's Agincourt is an anti-heroic, grotesque ballet fought in the rain, whereas Olivier's was a glorious, decorative pageant that took place on a sunny day, with the heavens as a backdrop.[3] Toward the end of this sequence in each film, a Te Deum can be heard on the soundtrack, but in Branagh's *Henry V* this choral hymn, beginning with the words "We praise thee, O God," takes on a grim irony less in light of the carnage we see (in a lengthy, diagonal tracking shot, the camera follows the victorious yet stunned Henry as he carries the dead York across the battlefield; when the camera at last leaves him and reframes, it is looking out over an entire corpse-strewn landscape in long shot) than of the convulsion we know has taken place in the body politic and the Providential design.

Just as there are no scenes of battle-as-glory in *Henry V*, there are no such scenes in Edward Zwick's *Glory*. War is real in both films: savage, chaotic, claustrophobic. What glory derived from Henry's victory at

[3] Branagh's Agincourt has more in common with the mud-soaked, fragmented, gruesomely powerful Battle of Shrewsbury in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (a.k.a. *Falstaff*, 1966) than with Olivier's shining set piece. Welles's film is an assemblage of all the Falstaff roles from *Henry IV*, *Parts I* and *II*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Henry V* (where Falstaff does not appear but where his death is reported and lamented by the denizens of the Boar's Head Tavern), tied together by a narration from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* (the major source of Shakespeare's history plays).

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Agincourt proved ultimately to be illusory; what glory derived from the defeat of the brave 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863, proved ultimately to be heavenly, like the glory in these verses from a traditional Negro spiritual: "If we meet no more in this world, / May we meet in Glory, where forgiveness abounds." Nonetheless, two monuments to the 54th still stand on earth: one, in bas-relief, by Augustus St. Gaudens (dedicated in 1897 on Boston Common, and shots of which appear at the end of *Glory*); and the other, in verse, by Robert Lowell ("For the Union Dead," written in 1963 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the battle for Fort Wagner). Now this film, this dramatic poem committed to celluloid, as Agee would have it, takes its place beside them.

The 54th Massachusetts was a black regiment in the Union Army, and its 600 soldiers were led by a white man, Col. Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a prominent abolitionist family from Boston. The 54th was not the first of what in the end became 166 black regiments (and approximately 180,000 black soldiers), nor was it the first to go into combat. But its performance at Fort Wagner, where it lost nearly half its men in addition to its leader, was both a turning point in the war and in the liberation of the black man. As the historian James M. McPherson has recently written,

> . . . Fort Wagner [was] a massive earthwork guarding the approach to Charleston. The Union military and naval effort to capture Charleston failed in 1863. So did this assault on Fort Wagner led by the 54th [with white troops following in their wake] . . . But . . . [t]he unflinching behavior of the regiment in the face of an overwhelming hail of lead and iron . . . demonstrated the manhood and courage of the race to millions of white people in both North and South who had doubted whether black men would stand in combat against soldiers of the self-styled master race.[4]

Black regiments had fought at Vicksburg during May and June of 1863, but not against the odds faced by the 54th at Fort Wagner. The bravery of this regiment, in McPherson's words, "helped to earn a front-line combat role for many other black regiments instead of the rear-area role as service and labor battalions that had been their original purpose" (p. 26). And the 54th's honorable showing convinced Lincoln that he had done the right thing in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 (effective January 1863), thus turning the Civil War into a war against slavery (as opposed to the suppression of an insurrection in eleven of the fifteen slave states)—and a war that would finally be won because, with the

[4] "The 'Glory' Story," *The New Republic*, Jan. 8 & 15, 1990, p. 22.

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freeing of the slaves, the South lost the four-million-strong labor force that had been sustaining its military effort.

Based on the nonfiction books *Lay This Laurel*, by Lincoln Kirstein, and *One Gallant Rush*, by Peter Burchard, as well as on the letters of Robert Gould Shaw to his parents (passages from which we hear Matthew Broderick, who plays Shaw, read in voice-over), *Glory* tells the story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry from its formation in the winter of 1863 to its valiant assault on Fort Wagner in the summer of the same year. We meet the twenty-three-year-old, Harvard-educated Shaw first, as a captain confidently leading his all-white troops past a line of scraggly, dispirited blacks and on to the Battle of Antietam (1862), where he is quickly wounded and the North soundly defeated. Soon we find him back in Boston, where Governor John Andrews of Massachusetts, in obedience to the proclamation that blacks would not only be emancipated but also "received into the armed services of the United States," has decided to organize the 54th Regiment and to make Shaw its commander, at the rank of colonel. Almost immediately we hear one of Shaw's fellow officers say that it will be dangerous giving guns to "coloreds"—a sentiment we would surely expect from Southern whites, but that existed in the hearts of many Northern whites as well and from which the film, to its credit, refuses to shrink. Indeed, from the time Shaw recruits his regiment to the moment he volunteers his soldiers to lead the charge at Fort Wagner, the biggest obstacle they face is neither their own rawness nor their lack of equipment, but rather the resistance of Yankee officers as well as enlisted men to the idea of blacks' serving as combat troops.

Along with two other officers, Shaw trains his black soldiers well, and he gets them the equipment they need plus the pay they deserve, but what he can't do until Fort Wagner is win for them the *respect* they deserve as men of courage, principle, and dignity. (Two examples of the verbal abuse to which members of the 54th are continually subjected by fellow Union soldiers: "I'd rather have a hog than a nigger—at least you can eat the hog"; "Stripes on a nigger [on John Rawlins, who has been promoted to the rank of sergeant major] are like tits on a bull.") And actually, he doesn't even win this respect for them at Fort Wagner—they do, as the camera signals during the approach to the fort when it shoots the black soldiers in empowering, low-angle close-ups, in contrast to the eye-level shots it employs on the two senior white officers, Shaw and Maj. Cabot Forbes, who have abandoned their horses to stand on level ground with their men. *Glory* is in fact organized around the desire of the blacks—most of them former slaves—to *fight*, almost from the instant they're recruited, and of Col. Shaw to lead them in that fight. He accepted the command of the 54th because, as an abolitionist, he wanted to help black troops strike back against the very kingdom that had once enslaved them; and the blacks enlisted in order to meet their former oppressors

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man-to-man, on the battlefield, not to perform for low pay the menial labor they had once had to perform for no pay at all.

Among the blacks in Shaw's regiment, four stand out, all of them fictional (screenplay by Kevin Jarre), and all of them compellingly acted: Thomas Searles (André Braugher), the educated boyhood friend of Shaw's, a free man who is the first to volunteer for service in the 54th; John Rawlins (Morgan Freeman), a gravedigger at Antietam whose quiet leadership and steadiness-under-fire earn him a battlefield commission; Sharts (Jihmi Kennedy), an ex-field hand from South Carolina whose stutter and sweet temper conceal an acute readiness to fight and die for his race; and Trip (Denzel Washington), an embittered, whip-scarred runaway slave from Tennessee who conflicts as much with his fellow black soldiers as with white officers (for instance, he calls the well-spoken Searles "Snowflake" and accuses Rawlins of being "the white man's dog" after he is promoted to sergeant major). Trip is the pivotal character among the members of the 54th, for it is he who undergoes the greatest change—so great that it seems contrived to give the film happy closure rather than dramatized to reveal the truth of his experience. Trip tells Shaw that he's fighting the war for himself—to work off his own anger and frustration—not for blacks and certainly not for (Northern) whites; to bolster his position, he refuses to bear the regimental colors during the assault on Fort Wagner as a reward for bravery during an earlier skirmish in a patch of South Carolina woods (the 54th's first, deadly encounter with the enemy). To Rawlins, Searles, and Sharts, Trip argues that in the end the war will have been futile, that the white man will never recognize blacks as anything but chimps, whether blacks are free or not. Trip intuits that the glory of the black man's hard-won dignity and humanity, his equal citizenship and political empowerment, will be short-lived, that the abolition of slavery will not mean the abolition of racism, of racial injustice and racial strife.

Trip is right, of course, and *Glory* would have been a stronger, braver film had he been permitted to go to his grave with his bitter perspicacity intact. Instead, during a religious revival of sorts the night before the attack on Fort Wagner, he undergoes a conversion, tearfully admitting that he loves the 54th, the only family he has ever really had, and agreeing with his comrades that if they die on the battlefield the next day, they will at least have died as free men, looking their enemy straight in the eye. Then during the assault on the fort, after the regimental flag has been dropped by a fatally wounded soldier, Trip picks it up, only to be instantly killed himself. We last see his body as Confederates toss it, in accentuating slow motion no less, into a ditch, where it lands next to Shaw's. How neat: rebellious former slave and his commanding white officer, united in death in a common grave. Too neat for my taste, too much a sacrifice of the larger, inglorious truth at which Trip, and the film as a whole, had painfully arrived.

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If Denzel Washington's acting is undercut by the last-minute change the filmmakers force his character to undergo, Shaw's character is undercut from start to finish by the acting of Matthew Broderick. Broderick brings sincerity to the part, but little else; he's a lightweight in a role that calls for gravity, for moral dimension and historical awareness. In "For the Union Dead," Robert Lowell tells us more about Shaw's character (as revealed by his depiction in the St. Gaudens monument) in six lines than Matthew Broderick does in two hours:

> He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
> a greyhound's gentle tautness;
> he seems to wince at pleasure,
> and suffocate for privacy.
>
> He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
> peculiar power to choose life and die—

No performance in *Glory*, good or bad, is helped by James Horner's music, which makes the film seem far more sentimental than it is, and which itself gets a syrupy assist now and then from the Boys' Choir of Harlem. Horner has composed the scores for such movies as *Cocoon*, *Willow*, and *Dad*, so we know that schmaltz is his métier. But didn't the producer, Freddie Fields, know this too? Didn't he realize that Horner's lush, emotive musical style would clash with Edward Zwick's mostly trim, unobtrusive directing style, already visible in his first feature, "*About Last Night . . .*" (1986; based on the far more unsparing play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, by David Mamet), and in his work for the television series "thirtysomething"? (Thankfully, Zwick has left the romance of these two projects out of *Glory*: there's not a "love interest" to be found, *Gone with the Wind* [1939] having long ago staked out exclusive claim to the romanticization of the Civil War, on the battlefield and the slave plantation as well as in the master bedroom.) Happily, Freddie Francis' cinematography complements Zwick's directing: Francis' colors are color-ful at the same time that they are slightly understated, and the effect, naturally, is realistic, is to fill the world with color in its infinite variety rather than several colors—blue, gray, brown—boldly fighting one another for dominance. Francis worked the same way as a black-and-white cinematographer on such films as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *Sons and Lovers* (1960), where he filled the Nottingham cityscape with subtle shades of gray rather than sharply contrasting the dark with the light.

Glory, alas, is flawed, like *Henry V*, but both these nobly intended films are worth seeing and seeing again, not least for their graphic battle sequences. *Glory*'s rapidly cut combat scenes easily surpass those of John Huston's *Red Badge of Courage* (1951) in visual excitement and historical accuracy as well as in the sheer horror of their close-range,

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even hand-to-hand, fighting. And the wealth of detail in these scenes matches that in the battle scenes of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), whose director and cameraman, D. W. Griffith and Billy Bitzer, had studied the Civil-War photographs of Mathew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan. It is the breadth and perfection of these battle sequences that one remembers from *Birth of a Nation*, not its racist politics or its silly melodrama. Similarly, it may be the battle sequences of *Glory* and *Henry V* that finally impress themselves most on our memories, since they alone are enough to remind us that, be the combatants blacks versus whites or English versus French, war makes equal, suffering, humbled beasts of us all, no matter how glorious or ignoble the cause. For the black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry as for Henry V, paradoxically, the battlefield was both the first and the last level field on which they would play. After battle, after life, would come the real judgment day.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

SOME OF THE BEST OF NEW YORK'S musical activity takes place in its music schools. Of these, the best known—the Juilliard School across from Lincoln Center—holds an easy lead in both the number and the appeal of its presentations open to the public, although rival centers of music education such as the Manhattan and Mannes Schools, Columbia University's graduate school of music and the Henry Street Settlement all contribute to the abundance of opportunities the city offers to hear new and old, familiar and rare music performed at least ably and often much better—and for a ticket price that Lincoln Center left behind decades ago.

Juilliard's pre-eminence stems from three sources: the size of its endowment, the commodiousness and acoustical excellence of its concert venues and the quality of its teaching staff and students. The school's reputation rests primarily on the ranks of accomplished instrumentalists who have emerged from its classrooms to bolster orchestras and chamber ensembles all across the land. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to hear a student recital as professional as anything in the rounds of the city's season, a Juilliard Symphony evening more satisfying than the usual fare across the street, or a faculty recital that might embarrass artists who regularly appear at Carnegie Hall. Outside the instrumental realm, too, the Juilliard drama and dance departments present worthy and enterprising productions, its student composers challenge the products of the widely admired Columbia composition department, and the Juilliard Opera Center regularly mounts small-scale vocal works in the sonically pleasing Juilliard Theater.

Cossetted in the financial embrace of the academic institution, the Opera Center can choose repertoire without calculating box-office risks, limited only by the students' capacities, the theater's resources and the production budget's size. In February the Center came up with an unusually fitting novelty, the U.S. premiere of the one-act chamber opera *Rothschild's Violin* by Benjamin Fleishmann.

Fleishmann was a composition student of Dmitri Shostakovich at the Leningrad Conservatory when, in 1941, he enlisted in the volunteer brigades formed to defend the city against the German siege. The twenty-eight-year-old composer died in battle, and Shostakovich and his family were evacuated from the city. But the teacher could not forget the student and his work, and less than a year later he pleaded by letter with a friend, who had remained behind, to

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retrieve the manuscript of the unfinished opera, which Fleishmann had entrusted to the Leningrad Composers' Union for safekeeping, and send it to him. According to Shostakovich, the work reached him late in 1943, and "all I had to do was complete the orchestration and copy the author's pencil score." Not until 1960 was it heard in the Soviet Union (one Soviet bureaucrat prevented a performance because the opera was "Zionist"), and it was first fully staged in Leningrad in 1968. Its first hearing outside Russia was as part of a Shostakovich festival in Duisburg, West Germany, in 1984.

Based on a story by Anton Chekhov (usually translated as "Rothschild's Fiddle"), the opera tells of Ivanov, an embittered and spiteful old Russian coffin maker in a Russian village who doubles as a violinist in the local Jewish band. He concentrates his malice on the band's flutist, Rothschild, who, in Chekhov's words, "contrived to play even the merriest tune in lachrymose style." But the death of his wife and her valedictory reminiscences of their long-dead daughter force him to face his spiritual aridity. In a change of heart, suspecting his own death to be near, he bequeaths his precious violin to Rothschild, who, in turn, fiddles Ivanov's old tune in his characteristically mournful way.

Like Chekhov's story, Fleishmann's operatic treatment is essentially inward, a study of one man's soul, and the four-character scenario, by Fleishmann himself, is little more than an extended monologue accompanied by chamber orchestra. But its musical possibilities are obvious. The continuous instrumental fabric knits together the opening strains of the band as it plays for a local wedding, Ivanov's abuse of and assault upon Rothschild, the exchange between Ivanov and his dying wife, a long soliloquy in which he laments the waste of his life, and the final scene in which he bestows the violin on Rothschild. The sounds of solo flute and solo violin link the score to the action. The work has lively and agitated passages, but it is the lyrical stretches, laced with Shostakovich-like harmonic and motivic pungency but often reminiscent as well of Mussorgsky and nineteenth-century Russian style, that distinguish the music.

The simple production, designed by Allen Moyer and directed by Christopher Mattaliano, relied upon a constructionist-inspired platform at stage rear and a few austere props, but was no less effective for that. The skilled students of the Juilliard Symphony, led by Bruno Ferrandis, made a convincing case for the music. Unfortunately the young singers had to struggle too much of the time to project over the instrumental ensemble.

The Juilliard forces coupled this premiere with *The Seven Deadly Sins,* the *"ballet chanté"* Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill wrote in Paris in 1933 after they had fled Germany. Scored for a single soprano, a male quartet and small orchestra, the piece was first performed at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées with Lotte Lenya; it was conducted by Maurice Abravanel and choreographed by George Balanchine. In

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what appears to be symptomatic of a general renewal of interest in Weill, the piece has recently attracted the likes of Marianne Faithfull and Teresa Stratas in this part of the world, and is part of two current European recording projects devoted to Weill's major scores.

Set in the cartoon America that had also served Brecht in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petit Bourgeois,* to spell out the full title, follows the fortunes of two "sisters"—Anna I and Anna II—as they travel through seven cities (Memphis, Los Angeles, Boston and so forth) in quest of money to build a house for the family (the male quartet) left behind in Louisiana. Anna II, a mute role for dancer, stands for healthy instinct and natural idealism, but Anna I's rational voice censures these tendencies. One after the other, Anna II's impulses—pride of accomplishment, moral outrage, romantic love, a normal appetite—are found wanting when subjected to the test of their utility in moneymaking: they are declared by Anna I to be the "sins" of pride, anger, lust, gluttony and so forth.

Here, more than in *Rothschild's Violin,* the troupe's inexperience tended to weaken the work's sophisticated and caustic wit. Again under Ferrandis, the orchestra played well, but without the piquancy and finesse necessary to lift the music above the mundane. The choreographic exposition of the seven stages of the Annas' progress by Jennifer Muller, fluent and expert as it was, ultimately failed to connect to the text in any enlivening way. The young dancers, led by Suzanne Auzias de Turenne as Anna II, performed efficiently. As Anna I, Susan Rosenbaum displayed an attractive timbre and a solid technique in the original soprano scoring that preceded Lenya's casting in the role and thus the revision downward that is heard in her CBS recording. But she too missed the role's central satirical rudeness, and got little of Michael Feingold's translation across.

Kurt Weill figures prominently in the career of the unclassifiable soprano Angelina Réaux. She has made her reputation in a variety of guises: from Mimi in Leonard Bernstein's Rome *Bohème* and his subsequent recording last year, and other operatic roles ranging from Purcell to Offenbach, across the spectrum through Broadway shows such as *Sweeney Todd* and Weill's *Street Scene* to one-woman shows that incorporate material from these genres, from French art song and from American popular tunes as well. In 1989 she fashioned a solo evening of Weill songs called "Stranger Here Myself" that sold out the Public Theater in New York. Early this year she took an all-Weill evening to Boston's Kurt Weill festival.

Her show at the Ballroom, a lower-midtown New York supper club, in February was described by most observers as cabaret, but it was more eclectic than that word implies. It drew heavily on Weill, and took in Gershwin, Sondheim, Harold Arlen, and a Piaf song, *L'accordéoniste.* But to these she added *"Mi chiamano Mimi"* from *Bohème,* Poulenc's *Chemins de l'Amour,* Marietta's Lied from Korngold's opera

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Die tote Stadt, Thelonious Monk's "'Round Midnight," and some new songs by her piano accompanist Ricky Ian Gordon that would not have been out of place on a concert program.

To the question whether she could unify such a melange, the answer is happily affirmative. Outside of her intelligence and taste, and the sheen and malleability of her warm lyric soprano, two factors account for her success. One is that the arias and art songs were cannily chosen—and delivered—to fit the quasi-conversational tone dictated by the circumstances and the bulk of the program.

The second factor is technical. Somehow Miss Réaux contrives to disguise the disparity between the operatic method of vocal production, which relies on a mixture of head and chest voice as the singer ascends the scale, and the Broadway method—that of popular singers, *chanteuses*, and cabaret singers—in which the chest voice is carried to the top of the range. Only now and then was the listener aware that an operatic sound had invaded the territory of the vernacular, and then more often than not because of a hint of the elevated English diction so beloved of voice teachers a generation ago. The fact that her voice is probably not of hall-filling volume in an opera house was an asset rather than a liability for this program.

Adding to her strengths were an ease with the three languages she sang (her German a little inferior to her French and English), a comic flair that just occasionally verged on the stagy, and an unaffected yet polished manner no matter what she was singing. "'Round Midnight" had a smoky intensity and the rhythmic stretch of the best jazz; Poulenc's very French trifle soared and dipped with cunning lightness; the Puccini aria was rich in tone and yet easefully discursive; Weill's "Pirate Jenny" didn't tickle the hairs on the back of the neck, but was sufficiently spiteful and menacing. In Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek" and an encore, "Dream a Little Dream of Me," Miss Réaux even gave a convincing and gently swinging impression of what the thirties and forties would have called a "songstress."

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center is now into its third decade at Alice Tully Hall. Under its founding director, Charles Wadsworth, even though the group pursued an active program of commissions and poked around the shelves of neglected music, its stock in trade was the familiar and accessible. A year or so ago, when the cellist Fred Sherry replaced Wadsworth, he declared that the focus would shift in the direction of the present and recent past. (The commissions continue—the past year's composer-in-residence was Gunther Schuller.) An early March evening showed the Society in its new colors.

The program opened conventionally enough with Beethoven's early Serenade for Violin, Viola and Cello, Op. 8. Ani Kavafian, Paul Neubauer and Sherry, resident members of the Society all, were on the respective instruments. The performance was adept and flowing;

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all three produced a rather reticent tone that could be deemed suited to the piece's small scale, but Kavafian's violin tended too often to lose out to the lower instruments.

Milton Babbitt and Elliot Carter followed, each represented by a short single-movement guitar piece played by David Starobin. Babbitt's *Composition for Guitar* (1984), described in the program notes as an example of a "comprehensive serial interstructuring of all definable parameters of composition, particularly using set theory," moved in fits and starts and exploited the extremes of the guitar's range. Babbitt's own reference to "the instrumental influence of Eddie Lang," the prewar jazz guitarist, suggested little that a listener to the piece for the first time could use to anchor the aural experience. Carter's *Changes* (1983), dedicated to Starobin, displayed a more contrasted structure and texture; it was dense and even sometimes clotted, in the composer's well-known style. The two were just long enough—some three to four minutes—so that the immediate aural appeal of their sound did not wear out its welcome. It was no surprise that their structural underpinnings were beyond the apprehension of a single hearing.

Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach*, Op. 3, for baritone and string quartet, brought the evening's first half to a close. The Society's members were joined by violinist Rolf Schulte and the estimable baritone Sanford Sylvan. To the sober, almost eviscerated setting of Matthew Arnold's poem Sylvan brought his customary refinement, unforced projection and winning legato. He is a natural chamber singer of the finest kind, vocally proficient and interpretively unfussy.

After intermission came the prize of the evening. Arnold Schoenberg's Serenade, Op. 24 (1923), is one of his most engaging works. Its seven movements, six purely instrumental ones enclosing a setting for baritone of Petrarch's Sonnet No. 217, ring a series of delightful changes on the instrumental combinations—Todd Palmer's clarinet, Dennis Smylie's bass clarinet and Peter Press's mandolin added to Schulte, Neubauer and Sherry (and briefly Sylvan).

Here the Society's new orientation proved its mettle: so assured were these players both stylistically and technically that the piece's close kinship to the Beethoven that opened the program must have been apparent to the most unrepentant partisan of tonality. The three central movements, all based on twelve-tone rows to an extent, were very far from being dutifully gray and academic; in the *Variationen* and *Tanzscene*, Palmer's clarinet was especially eloquent and diverting, and everywhere the ensemble was distinguished by energy, clarity and swing. As encores the instrumentalists appropriately chose Schoenberg arrangements of a Johann Strauss waltz and *Funiculi, funicula*, as if to reinforce the point that if you scratch a radical theorist you are likely to find a human being and a musician of charm.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Henry Mencken's Prejudices

I HAVE COME LATE TO MENCKEN. His name was infrequently, if ever, sounded in English classrooms of the 1950s, for by that time he had pretty much disappeared as a force in literary criticism. The cerebral thrombosis he suffered in 1948 left him without the ability to read or write, though he lingered on for almost eight years, cared for by his brother, August. But well before 1948 his influence had waned, and not merely because of his opposition to Roosevelt and World War II. In 1928, T.S. Eliot began a discussion of Irving Babbitt's humanism by noting that "It is proverbially easier to destroy than to construct," and adducing Mencken as a critic whose "brilliant attack" was mounted against "aspects of contemporary society which we know and dislike." Thus Mencken's popularity had to do with the familiarity of both his targets and of the terms in which he criticized them. "But there are more serious critics than Mr. Mencken," declared Mr. Eliot in his most churchwardenly manner. By the 1950s, of course, English professors had caught up to Eliot, sort of, and his pronouncements had all the prestige Mencken's lacked.

So Mencken was classified and condescended to as a journalist (as if the many pieces written to deadline by Eliot were something else!) and a dogmatic one at that, whose judgments had not worn well. In his study of modern literary critics, *The Armed Vision* (1948), Stanley Edgar Hyman devoted a paragraph to Mencken in the midst of an unfriendly chapter about Yvor Winters. He saw Mencken as someone, like Winters and like Ezra Pound (but on a lower, "journalistic" level) whose specialty was dogmatic evaluation. Hyman proceeded to devalue Mencken by producing some of his more unconvincing judgments—especially his admiration for the poetry of Lizette Reese—as indications of a lack of literary credentials. In fact, Mencken's early *A Book of Prefaces* contains essays on Conrad and Dreiser that deserve to be called pioneering and are still well worth reading; but out of excessive respect for critics, or out of mere laziness, I never until recently got round to seeing for myself. Thus the publication of this diary,[1] recorded between 1930 and 1948, has provided a much-too-long delayed entry into the world of a remarkable writer.

Mencken's six volumes of short essays are titled *Prejudices*, an apt

[1] THE DIARY OF H. L. MENCKEN, ed. by *Charles A. Fecher*. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.00.

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identification of the principal aspect of his critical mind. In a diary entry of 1939, he speaks to the matter without using the word itself:

> It has . . . been assumed on frequent occasions that I have some deep-lying reformatory purpose in me. This is completely nonsensical. It always distresses me to hear of a man changing his opinions, so I never seek conversions. My belief is that every really rational man preserves his major opinions unchanged from his youth onward. When he vacillates it is simply a sign that he is stupid. My one purpose in writing I have explained over and over again: it is simply to provide a kind of katharsis for my own thoughts. They worry me until they are set forth in words. This may be a kind of insanity, but at all events it is free of moral purpose.

One could term this statement a prejudice in favor of prejudice. The year after Mencken published his first volume of *Prejudices*, Robert Frost declared, in a vein Mencken might have admired, that "I'd no more set out in pursuit of the truth than I would in pursuit of a living unless mounted on my prejudices." Mencken's "really rational man" is in fact a creature of prejudices, acquired early on and stubbornly adhered to over the years. Such ideas of persistence and adherence crop up in moments when a writer attempts to take stock of where he stands on "ultimate" matters, as when John Updike (in his memoir "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood") considers his childhood beliefs in the infinite radiance of art: "How innocent! But his assumption here, like his assumptions on religion and politics, is one for which I have found no certain substitute." Updike puts it delicately, but what he puts forth is—like Mencken's and Frost's declarations—a radically conservative assertion which marks a corresponding temperament.

One sees other marks of such a temperament in the above diary entry. There is Mencken's disclaimer of any moral purpose in what he writes, as well as the insistence—surely an overinsistence—that any "vacillation" where major opinions are concerned is "simply" a sign of stupidity and that his purpose in writing is "simply" cathartic. This is the mode of utterance of a man (and Mencken is always very much a "man") who has followed, so it seems to him, Dr. Johnson's directive to Boswell: "Clear your *mind* of cant." Johnson said that it was all right to *talk* cant (signing a letter "your humble servant" when you were not the recipient's humble servant) but not to think that way. Mencken tried not to talk that way either, so when a neighbor's dog became a nuisance he wrote the neighbor an un-cantish letter:

> Dear Charlie:
>
> Your dog barked yesterday from about 5.30 p.m. to 7 or thereabout. I called up your house but got no answer; apparently there was no one home. As a result of this uproar I had to abandon some important work on which I was engaged. Such interruptions

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> to my work cost me money, and disturbances of my rest, at my age, are dangerous to my health. I have been aroused from sleep as early as 6.45 a.m. and as late as 12.30 midnight.
>
> I must ask you once more to stop this nuisance. So long as your sister was living I remembered her plea that she felt insecure in the house without the dog. But that reason is now gone. I am therefore trusting you either to teach your dog to stop disturbing the neighborhood or to get a dog less noisy.

"Charlie" (who is later characterized, in the diary entry, as a "complete moron") didn't answer the letter. But the barking subsided.

Readers who have heard about Mencken's diary only through the newspaper publicity surrounding its publication are likely to associate his "prejudices" wholly with his attitudes toward Jews and (in the current phrase) people of color. There's no doubt that Mencken had a fair amount of what Pound called (in reference to his own anti-Semitism) "the cheap suburban prejudice," and that his attitudes toward Negroes were condescending to say the least. (During the years Mencken kept his diary I was growing up in upstate New York and hearing much the same sort of thing from people less interesting than Mencken.) One could argue that a good writer and an important critic who tried to clear his mind of cant should have been harder on his assumptions about race. But in fact some of the people who make noise about Mencken's bigotry are harder to put up with than the bigot himself.[2] Another way to look at the matter is to say that when, in his diary, Mencken remarks that so-and-so is a "clever Jew" or that "it is impossible to talk anything resembling discretion or judgment into a colored woman," he has—in addition to embracing stereotypes—lost his sense of humor. Much of the good writing in this diary, as it sets forth the strong opinions of a man who doesn't change his mind, is instinct with humor. Like the Twain whom he so much admired and the Frost whose humor he underestimated ("sour resignationism" was what he saw in that "standard New England poet"), Mencken is one of the authentic humorists in American

[2] In this connection, a letter to the *Washington Post* (Jan. 12, 1990) by Doris Grumbach counted twenty-four anti-Semitic references in the published diary, while opining that there must have been many more in the unpublished parts. Grumbach concluded that anyone not offended by these references possessed "an antisemitic sensibility." In reply, two letters defended Mencken, not just by invoking the old line that some of his best friends—like Alfred Knopf and George Jean Nathan—were Jews, but that he had spoken out, in the 1930s, in favor of opening the borders of this country and others so as to admit German Jews. One of the letter writers, himself a Jew, said that Grumbach was free to denounce Mencken the public writer for his private anti-Semitism, but that she had no business condemning *him*, the letter-writer, for possessing "an antisemitic sensibility"—thus doing her own name-calling in public. He concluded by quoting Mencken: "All persons who devote themselves to forcing virtue on their fellow men deserve nothing better than a kick in the pants." I found this a satisfying response to Doris Grumbach's virtue.

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letters. The humor is very dry indeed and recalls Frost's observation that dry humor is the kind "that doesn't seem to appreciate itself." Mencken is good at playing this game, especially given the temptation that a diary (composed partly with posterity in mind) presents to an over-appreciating of one's own bon mots.

Some examples: there is the flat recitation of a remark about William Randolph Hearst, passed on to Mencken from someone else: "Hearst married a prostitute, and then gradually dragged her down to his own level." After lunch with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mencken notes that Fitzgerald went to Paris with the notion of accumulating "new experience" for his novels. "Unfortunately," writes Mencken, "Fitzgerald is a heavy drinker, and most of his experience has been got in bars." An evening with T.S. Eliot left him less than thrilled: "An amiable fellow, but with little to say. He told me that his father was a brick manufacturer in Missouri. . . . I drank a quart of home-brew beer, and Eliot got down two Scotches. A dull evening." (One would have liked to have listened in on that dullness.) On a trip with Joseph Hergesheimer through the Pennsylvania-Dutch territory around Lancaster, Mencken confides that they "passed through towns of such astonishing names as Blue Ball, Bird-in-Hand, and Intercourse. How Intercourse got its name no one knows. The place attracts a great many automobile tourists [it certainly did yours truly] who stop off to send out postcards." And one is hardly surprised, though still pleased, to hear Mencken identify someone as probably a Christian Scientist, since "He had the calm, complacent air peculiar to the brethren, and the pale, somewhat pasty complexion."

On occasion he decides to give an episode full-dress treatment, as in a portrait of his recently dead friend Max Brödel, an anatomical artist at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and a fellow member of the Saturday Night Club, a group of amateur music-lovers who met for weekly performances and conviviality (Mencken played the piano, it seems quite expertly). Mencken and a professor of biology named Raymond Pearl are discussing, one night "at the beer-table," the matter of sexual intercourse, which Brödel suggests is overrated since it only lasts about a minute. Mencken and Pearl are dumfounded by this and they question Brödel further:

> The more we cross-examined him the plainer it became that he actually believed what he had said. When Pearl argued that any man who entertained a lady for so little as two minutes was guilty of a gross offense, not only against her person but against the peace and dignity of the human race, it was Max's turn to be astonished. He had simply never heard that copulation could be prolonged at will—at all events, far beyond the limits he had set. . . . On the heels of this grotesque discussion Pearl announced the founding of an organization to be called the Society for More and Better Fucking in the Home.

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This could have been ruined by heavy-handed yucking and jeering; Mencken finds just the right mix of tones and diction—from "the peace and dignity of the human race" to "More and Better Fucking"—to bring it off.

He is adept also at handling "vulgar" matters in such a way that they turn into humorous art. At the annual Gridiron Club dinner in 1946 (always a bore, Mencken complained, though he always attended), he is seated at an elevated guest-table, with President Truman two places away on one side and the Duke of Windsor three places away on the other. After getting through a long stretch of the evening, during which Mencken has talked mainly to the British and Philippine ambassadors who flank him, there is at ten o'clock "a sort of seventh-inning stretch" in which "the guests all rush for the pissoirs":

> When I got to the nearest I found dignitaries lined up before each stall, with the Duke at the end of one line. Patterson, who was with me, was enchanted by this spectacle, and whooped it up as a proof of the Duke's democratic spirit. But what else could he do? The brethren ahead of him had full bladders and could not give him place. I was disinclined to get into line myself, so I started to find another pissoir. At the door I met Felix Frankfurter, who suggested that we try the cubicles opposite the stalls. It cost five cents to get into one, but the money was well spent. When I left mine I held the door open and let some other guest in on my nickel.

One hopes that Frankfurter did likewise. Earlier in the evening, Mencken reports, Frankfurter was "very attentive" and urged Mencken and the British ambassador to become friends. After Frankfurter left, the ambassador informed Mencken that he had been warned that Mencken was "anti-English" (certainly a reasonable judgment, given some of his statements) to which "I replied that this was a gross calumny, circulated by Japs." Enough said.

Mencken claimed that his only purpose in writing was to provide a catharsis for his thoughts. If one prefers to avoid cathartic talk, one might say, on the evidence of these diary entries, that he loved to put life into sentences, to state things clearly—and was committed to the idea that they could be stated clearly; never was anyone less of an anguished theorist within the prison-house of language. When in 1939 Al Capone, suffering from paresis, is admitted to the syphilitic clinic at Johns Hopkins, Mencken spends a couple of pages describing Capone's treatment, the circumstances of his admission to the clinic, Capone's temperature (as high as 106 degrees), his way of bearing discomforts ("very philosophically") and his popularity with the hospital staff: "he is not only a good patient, he is also likely to leave large tips." In this entry we see a writer animated by nothing more than the spirit of pure curiosity: Mencken wanted to know what was happening, to himself as well as to others. As his sixtieth birthday

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approached in 1940, he kept close track of his physical condition (he had already suffered blood vessel spasms in the cortex) which he assumes involves sclerosis in the coronary artery: "This is an incurable condition, and I can only look forward to its gradual worsening. Thus my life-long feeling that I would probably not live much beyond sixty appears to have been well grounded." There is a disinterestedness in this way of writing about his mortal condition that makes the statement, bleak as it is, something not only he but we can take a modicum of comfort in.

Mencken's writing about women seems to me correspondingly invigorating (his early *In Defence of Women*, 1918, should be looked up). In a discussion of how all of us play parts, thus making "honest autobiography" a contradiction in terms, he speaks about the marital relation:

> Thus a man's wife, however realistic her view of him, always flatters him in the end, for the worst she sees in him is appreciably better by the time she sees it, than what is actually there. What she sees . . . is not the authentic man at all, but a compound made up in part of the authentic man and in part of his projection of a gaudy ideal. The man who is most respected by his wife is the one who makes this projection most vivid—that is, the one who is the most daring and ingratiating liar. He can never, of course, deceive her utterly, but if he is skillful he may at least deceive her enough to make her happy.

This seems to me both disenchanted and humorous to boot, so it is especially touching when the disenchanted man (his wife, Sara, having died five years previously after a marriage of only five years), looks back on their time together in a long entry of which I quote only a small part:

> Marriage is largely talk, and I still recall clearly the long palavers that we used to have. Both of us liked to work after dinner in the evening, but both of us always stopped at 10 p.m. If there were no visitors, which was usually the case, we sat in the drawing-room that she was so proud of, and had a few drinks before turning in. On Sunday nights, with the servants out, she often made supper in the kitchen, and we ate it there. We had plenty to talk of. I talked out my projects with her, and she talked out hers with me. I don't think we ever bored each other. I know that, for my part, the last days of that gabbling were as stimulating as the first. I never heard her say a downright foolish thing.

This is really to say a lot about what a good marriage feels like.

Having a few drinks before turning in, or indeed having them whenever Mencken was not working, is a pleasantly recurring theme

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in the diary. Early along there occurs a fine anecdote about going with Alfred Knopf to visit Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1931, for a Bach festival, and trying in vain the first day to procure beer. Years later, during the war, the state of beer at New York's Luchow's restaurant is deplored ("I drank a Seidel each of the six beers on draught, and found them all bad") and, after the war, so is the lack of adequate beerhouses and drinkable draft beer in Baltimore: "*Sic transit.* The decent pleasures of life have diminished enormously in my time." All things considered, it was best to stay home where he had a cellar full of excellent wines and liquors and where he could get the best lunch to be gotten in Baltimore: "I go out relatively seldom, and have guests even seldomer. Two evenings out of three August and I have a few quiet drinks together in our living-room, and they are always first-rate drinks." If you don't warm to an observation like that last one, then Mencken is probably not your kind of writer.

As the prejudiced observer grew older, the *sic transit* note is recurrently struck, from the decline of the railroads and the Baltimore *Sunpapers* (with which he was—ever more uncomfortably—associated), to the death of friends and to what he saw as his own decline:

> My health deteriorates steadily, and anything resembling sustained work is now impossible. After my struggle with my mail in the morning I begin to feel exhausted and by noon I am beset by discomforts in the region of my heart. . . . I take a nap every afternoon before dinner, but it restores me very little, and I always awaken feeling wretched, as I do every morning on arising.

This, from 1943, is one of a number of such complaints. The death of Roosevelt, whom he despised, brought with it no satisfaction, only a melancholy deprivation, since the Baltimore saloons and restaurants closed down Saturday night out of respect for the president whose body passed through the city at midnight: "As a result, the Saturday Night Club missed its usual post-music-beer-party for the first time in forty years." Instead he and his brother went home, "had a couple of high-balls" and went to bed. One recalls the opening of Wordsworth's "Mutability" sonnet:

> From low to high doth dissolution climb,
> And sink from high to low, along a scale
> Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
> A musical but melancholy chime.

I found the melancholy chime in this diary extraordinarily affecting, since most of the time it is struck in a tone similar to the dryly humorous recitation of absurdities found in the pissoirs at the

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Gridiron Club. A final entry, for May 5, 1946, may provide the proper mood with which to conclude:

> After two weeks of rain, cold and high winds, today (a Sunday) opened gloomily, but by 10 a.m. the sun was shining and in the afternoon the temperature was up to 70 degrees. August and I spent the morning in the backyard. We planted morning-glory seeds, prepared the ground for the petunias that should come in from Cook the florist this week, banked the ferns with peat moss, trimmed the vines, and did a lot of other chores. I became so warm at work that I took off my coat, but in a few minutes a chilly west wind came up, and I had to put it on again. The yard never looked more lovely. The trees, the vines along the fences, and the ivy on the ground all show the bright greens of Spring, and the coleus that I have been setting out (bought in Lexington market) are flourishing. But in a little while this first blush will fade, all the greens will grow darker, and the yard will settle down for the struggle with the heat of a Baltimore summer.

A year before his stroke, he laments his diminished energy: "After three hours at my desk I must stop for rest." What a standard of performance he held himself to! Such persistence, and such a persistent love of life, for all the complaints and the contempt, may provide some nourishment for our own seasonal struggle.

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DEAN FLOWER

Story Problems

IF YOU YAWNED THROUGH THE LONGEURS of *The Name of the Rose* as I did, and preferred the film, you would be ill-advised to shell out $22.95 for Umberto Eco's latest opus.[1] The dust jacket claims it's an "entertainment," but for how many readers is it fun to sit through protracted history lectures faked up as conversation? To surrender characterization, credibility, and immediacy in order to play dungeons and dragons with a group of obsessed occultists (who all sound alike) spinning theories about the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, the Druids, and cabalists of every description? Eco is not without interesting, sometimes even entertaining, ideas about the making of history, the reading of signs and symbols, the ciphering of mysteries to decipher. But his book is a patchwork. What kept it on the bestseller lists so long?

The narrator is a Milanese history student aptly, ominously named Casaubon. Having written a doctoral thesis on the Knights Templar, Casaubon sets himself up as a "private eye of learning," an intellectual's equivalent of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, doing the dirty work of "a cultural investigation agency." It is symptomatic of the novel's lameness that Eco doesn't reach this witty conception until page 224. Casaubon's editor friends, Belbo and Diotallevi, work for a publisher of scholarly books who does a sideline in the occult—theosophy, numerology, syncretism, cosmogony—the sort of thing Roderick Usher studied in his falling house. Soon Casaubon has become an editor too, promoting a new series called, à la Mme. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled. Eco's appetite for quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore matches that of his characters. Not a single chapter begins without a portentous and solemn-sounding epigraphic quotation, and there are exactly one hundred twenty of them. (Fortunately, some of the epigraphs are bogus and a few are funny, like the one from Woody Allen, but you have to wade through five hundred pages to reach it.)

Casaubon and his cohorts meet a mysterious Colonel Ardenti, obsessed by the notion of a centuries-old underground society which guards the secret of the world's power—if only it can recover the lost map of its location. Not a very original idea, but then, as Alfred

[1] FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM, by *Umberto Eco*. Trans. by *William Weaver*. Harcourt Brace Javanovich. $22.95.

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Hitchcock taught us, the McGuffin never is. Ardenti (soon to be missing) thinks he has a clue in the fragmentary manuscript of one Ingolf (missing), who has a clue from another fragmentary manuscript which was hidden in a Templar castle—a clue, perhaps, to the (missing) map. So we are reading Eco's fiction of Casaubon's interpretation of Ardenti's reading of Ingolf's reading of a hypothetical manuscript. I mention these pseudo-complexities to suggest how Eco strains in this novel for some rather obvious meanings. The "revelations" that emerge at the end are quite evident hundreds of pages before: what the detective discovers is his own fingerprints; the conspiracy theory is a figment of our own need for meaning, belief, order; such figments take on a reality of their own and have a destructive nastiness far worse than the "evils" that prompted them; anything can be seen as a hieroglyph of something else; anything can be "discovered" to be connected with anything else; the game of analogies is not only endless, it's facile.

But if these are the moral issues of the novel, why does Eco himself play the game of analogies so extravagantly, teasing us with the old Romanticist's notion "that everything might be mysteriously related to everything else"? The answer may be that he partly believes in it after all. There's a fine scene somewhere in the pulpy middle of this book in which Casaubon's shape-shifting antagonist Agliè deconstructs the fictions of numerology. He demonstrates that all those uncanny relationships between the measurements of Egyptian pyramids and the measurements of the earth and the solar system (the sort of correspondence numerologists dote upon) can be likewise "discovered" in the dimensions of a common lottery-ticket kiosk. Someone says, "Then you don't believe in numerologies of any kind." "On the contrary, I believe firmly," Agliè replies:

> I believe the universe is a great symphony of numerical correspondences, I believe that numbers and their symbolisms provide a path to special knowledge. But if the world, below and above, is a system of correspondences where tout se tient, it's natural for the kiosk and the pyramid, both works of man, to reproduce in their structure, unconsciously, the harmonies of the cosmos. . . . If there is a secret, it is much more profound.

My guess is that the popular success of the novel stems from Eco's fascination with the idea that we are, consolingly, inescapably, a part of the cosmic harmony, and so our designs necessarily reflect its design, our subtexts imply its text, our plots adumbrate its intentionality. Parodying Forster's "Only connect," Eco advises "Suspect, only suspect." Or rather, one of his characters does, in a fit of semiotic fervor. Eco is careful not to say these things directly himself. So it is Belbo who expresses the Poeian-Nabokovian-Pynchonian dream that "every detail of the world, every voice, every word written or spoken

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has more than its literal meaning . . . tells us of a Secret." And perhaps looking for that cipher is what tempts the reader to slog on through Eco's rhetorical labyrinths.

Near the end of the ordeal, after six hundred pages and a climax of singular brutality and grand guignol horror, Casaubon seeks out a therapist and tells him the whole incredible story, at length, in detail. The impassive doctor never interrupts. When the confession is over, Casaubon waits ten, fifteen minutes. Then the doctor explains calmly, "Monsieur, vous êtes fou." Not another word. It is one of Eco's few genuinely comic moments, and of course it sends up the whole novel. Has it all been an entertainment at the reader's expense? Caveat emptor.

While Eco likes to think about coding and deciphering stories, Mario Vargas Llosa is concerned with the moral dilemmas of writing them. In both *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, about the making of a political hero, and *Who Killed Palomino Molero?*, about a murder investigation aborted by politics, Vargas Llosa looks at the storyteller's power very critically indeed. The question always becomes, who has the authority to write what "really" happened? His latest novel is no less an investigation of the same process, except that it has become autobiographical.[2] He wants to write of the Machiguengas, an Amazonian Indian tribe whose curiously elusive customs and beliefs are totally at odds with the dominant culture, that of contemporary Spanish-speaking Peru. He is fascinated by their difference, and wishes to preserve it from the contaminations of the modern world. "Well-meaning" anthropologists will easily turn the vulnerable Machiguengas into a commodity, and fit them to their own value systems. So will Vargas Llosa himself, to some extent, no matter how scrupulously he avoids rationalizing their behavior or explaining their myths.

Paradoxically, the only outsider to comprehend their culture and assimilate himself into it, is a red-haired, white-skinned Jewish friend of the author. He goes by the name of Mascarita, "mask-face," partly because he has a grotesque facial birthmark. His function is to preserve the tribe by telling and re-telling its stories. Even when their fragile society sways to the influence of airplanes and radios, print and tape recorders, the storyteller reaffirms their deepest culture and their most private selves. The storyteller performs this vital function even when, especially when—here is Vargas Llosa's boldest stroke—the stories Mascarita tells become autobiographical. In fact the storyteller *invents* the tribe's mythology, he doesn't just repeat it. Sometimes he even borrows material from strange sources, without

[2] THE STORYTELLER, by *Mario Vargas Llosa*. Trans. by *Helen Lane*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $17.95.

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any violation of tribal integrity, as in his tale of the Machiguenga who wakes up one morning to discover he has been transformed into a giant beetle. This is not Vargas Llosa's most approachable fiction, partly because it's a story he refused to falsify by turning into a well-made story. But it is central to his conception of a writer's paradoxical relation to his country: an alien insider. Surely that's a parable of Vargas Llosa himself.

Storytelling is not an easy business. Collections of stories tend not to sell very well, perhaps because they are assumed to be sketches of uneven quality, preparations for a big important novel, the work of beginners, or lacking in cumulative power. Yet some writers need that shorter form and work best in it. And some story sequences—*Dubliners*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Golden Apples*—become far more than collections. Larry Woiwode's latest book is an interesting case in point.[3] As a novelist Woiwode tends toward a more figurative and rhetorical style. *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (1975) and *Poppa John* (1981) are marred for me by an arty self-consciousness that I don't find in the stories. Woiwode started publishing stories about the Neumiller family in 1964, gathered and recast them into *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, and now has un-gathered them, un-revising some and re-revising others, and added three new, longer pieces. I think it makes a superb family chronicle, released in a tightly-controlled, epiphanic style. Woiwode has a particular gift for expanding the frame at a story's end, so that what seemed immediate becomes remembered and what was moving freezes into a snapshot taken years ago. Or else his narrative camera pulls back and you see a whole landscape. It beautifully corrects for the intense and finely-detailed close-ups that are his usual style.

An opposite problem occurs in Carl Djerassi's first novel.[4] He revised and expanded a story first published in this magazine,[5] giving it additional character and plot and decking it out with much information about the Nobel Prizes and current modes of graduate study. But the fascinating moral issues of the story are not any more complex in the novel. The characterization is wooden, especially the women, and the plot—generating considerable suspense—is infected by sentimentality. Even more disappointingly I must report that Madison Smartt Bell's latest novel also errs on the side of length.[6] His earlier novel, *Straight Cut*, and his story collection, *Zero db*, have a wonderful astringent brevity and clarity. But the new novel lacks

[3] THE NEUMILLER STORIES, by *Larry Woiwode*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $18.95.
[4] CANTOR'S DILEMMA, by *Carl Djerassi*. Doubleday. $18.95.
[5] Carl Djerassi, "Castor's Dilemma," Vol. XXXIX, No. 3 (Autumn 1986).
[6] SOLDIER'S JOY, by *Madison Smartt Bell*. Ticknor & Fields. $19.95.

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drive, gives itself too much room and goes slack. It relies on incantatory repetition that you soon want to skip. You know what this soldier's joy is going to be, and lose interest. The evocations of the woods at night, of animal rustlings and moonlight, the speech of the hill people, the racial struggle, are all fashioned well—but not distinctively. It sounds like the style of too many Andrew Lytles and Robert Penn Warrens to come out of the mid-South in the last thirty years. I think Bell's originality lies elsewhere, perhaps in the city, certainly in shorter forms.

Jane Smiley recently observed, "I know that when I see an author being contemplative, I like to be able to look and say, 'well, there's just 90 pages here,' instead of 'Oh no, there's 400!' " She has brilliantly solved the problem of story vs. novel in her latest book by pairing two first-person narratives.[7] Each is about 100 pages long and seems—at first—wholly independent of the other, with different characters and settings, different styles and pace. But the combination makes for a larger, deeper book. Her design is simply to pair the point of view of a father with that of a mother. *Ordinary Love* is told by fifty-two-year-old Rachel Kinsella, a woman trying to get through to her grown children that she is a real person, with urges and needs like theirs, and not simply "Mother." Twenty years ago her marriage broke up, her angry husband yanked the five children away, family happiness ended—and she was the cause, supposedly. The children have not yet understood why it happened nor have they forgiven her. *Good Will* is told by thirty-four-year-old Bob Miller, a Viet Nam veteran who comes back to make a separate peace for himself, his wife and young son. He builds a house in the country and they live a Thoreauvian dream of self-sufficiency—no car, no telephone, no dependence on money. They grow and make everything needed, bartering for the rest. Fatefully the dream comes to a tragic destruction, in a superbly controlled and suspenseful drama. It reminds me a bit of Shirley Jackson in method—no ornament, no rhetoric, the most unobtrusive of styles. Smiley's narrators just seem to tell us what they think, or just plain what happens. Which makes the events themselves seem all the more inevitable, and frightening.

Matter-of-factly Sarah in *Ordinary Love* remembers how her husband struck her when she confessed her affair. Later he did it again, knocking her down. Then he ordered her out, sold the house, and took the family to England. Sarah still admires his professional intelligence, his personal magnetism, but she finds his will frightening. She realizes that their married happiness wasn't based on love. It stemmed from his ego, and she was only an appendage. Why the

[7] ORDINARY LOVE & GOOD WILL: Two Novellas, by *Jane Smiley*. Alfred A. Knopf. $17.95.

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affair? She tries to explain it to her children: "I wanted him to know I wasn't his." In this context the other story's title becomes deeply ironic: "good will" is certainly what Bob Miller means to have, but his will to control and dominate his family—especially his seven-year-old son Tom, is much stronger than his goodness. The catastrophe in this family is worse than that in the Kinsella family: the boy's reaction to his father's suffocating will is a profound psychotic disturbance, but he and Sarah are rebelling logically against exactly the same forces.

Smiley's artfulness in unfolding these twinned experiences is so unobtrusive as to seem magical. Here is Bob Miller telling us about an impulse he yields to one winter day, skating rings around his son:

> It is a strange and exhilarating feeling, circling him like this, sort of strobosequentially—in his face, his taut left arm, the arc of his shoulders, his right hip, his back again. I can even trick myself into thinking I am stationary and he is doing a slow, impossible spin here in the glinting blue darkness. I am a camera. I am a fence, a palisade, a moat enclosing him.

Little does he realize what these enclosures will cost. But there's a more obvious point, the irony of his seeing so much (intelligently, imaginatively) and being blind to what he's really doing. Rachel in *Ordinary Love* was blind too, twenty years ago, but she learned to see. Her concluding wisdom has resonance for both stories: "I too," she thinks, "have done the thing I least wanted to do, . . . I have given my children the two cruelest gifts I had to give, which are these, the experience of perfect family happiness, and the certain knowledge that it could not last." Bob sees somewhat less than this at the end of *Good Will*, but at least he knows that the "gift" of perfect family happiness was a deception. What he wished for himself and his family he got, and it demolishes him: "though wishes express power or desire [he writes], their purpose is to reveal ignorance: the more fulfilled wishes, the more realized ignorance."

Julian Barnes also combines stories, elaborately and ingeniously. And he poses problems like nobody else. His latest novel seems at first a flippant entertainment, and looks like a loose collection of stories.[8] But it is neither. Segments of it appeared, standing perfectly on their own, in recent issues of *The New Yorker*. But don't be deceived. This is the most interesting re-invention of the modernist novel in the last ten years. Its chapters build upon each other in complex and surprising ways, and the whole is vastly greater than its parts. It begins with the story of Noah and the Ark, told from the point of view of a woodworm—a savagely funny deconstruction of that consoling old

[8] A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10½ CHAPTERS, by *Julian Barnes*. Knopf. $18.95.

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yarn, but its centerpiece—literally—is "The Raft of the Medusa." Géricault's huge canvas of 1819 is reproduced in color, a visual center panel preceded by historical narrative (what happened when *The Medusa* sank) and followed by an analysis of how Géricault composed the picture and what it means. The analysis is nothing less than hypnotic, and its significance grows as the whole novel's design unfolds. Barnes's theme is the relation of catastrophe to art, particularly the ways that language mediates our struggles for survival.

Each chapter focuses on a disaster, from the flood survived by Noah and the woodworms to the final sinking none of us survives. There is a terrorist takeover of a Mediterranean liner ("The Visitors"), a woman trying to sail away from a nuclear disaster ("The Survivor"), and a film actor who drowns on location in Venezuela ("Upstream!"). Chapter 7 is three narratives based on historical calamity: one tells of a survivor of the *Titanic* who tries to become an extra in a film version of the event, another discusses some modern instances of the Jonah story, and the third concerns refugee Jews aboard the *St. Louis* in 1939, unable to find asylum. Two chapters are about characters who go to Mount Ararat in search of its spiritual meaning: one a devout Dublin woman in 1839 ("The Mountain") and the other a born-again Christian American astronaut in 1975 ("Project Ararat"). The "half" chapter, called simply "Parenthesis," speaks directly to the reader about love. Essay, history, realistic fiction, beast fable, dream—Barnes is a virtuoso of narrative device. Yet every chapter has its version of the ark or raft, and we learn to see those fabulous constructions of Noah and Géricault as the crafts of our survival. Every chapter also has its reminder of the woodworms, munching away at our constructions.

The inventive energy of this book is more than a little astonishing, despite occasional excesses. In each story Barnes takes a fresh look at how we use language, and how it comes to supplant reality and deceive us. The lingo switches from British to Australian to middle American, from Biblical rhetoric of the nineteenth century to legalese of the fifteenth, from the letters of a callow Hollywood film star to the smooth talk of a BBC television lecturer. Barnes finds language a frail vessel indeed, but one regularly assumed to be seaworthy. Franklin Hughes, the lecturer on a Mediterranian "culture cruise," thinks he can be a hero and outwit the hijackers through his clever verbiage. Charlie, the film star in Venezuela, thinks he can say anything carelessly and take it back by writing "Joke!" In the midst of apparent nuclear holocaust in "The Survivor" men speak calmly of "sorting things out." Language, says Barnes, is almost constantly out of whack with reality. Even Charlie the cliché expert recognizes this, for a moment: "The apple of my eye. What does it mean? You say words like that and everyone knows what they mean but when you look at them you can't understand them."

Another character sees the problem as "fabulation": "You make up

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a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them." Barnes repeats exactly the same words later, in his own voice, adding with bitter eloquence, "Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history." Yet this is not an embittered book, just a deeply serious one. It argues against the consoling myths, epitomized by the fable of Noah's Ark and the illusion of our privileged status. It argues for Géricault's sense of proportion: survival is in doubt, hope and despair on the raft are evenly divided, and that is all we can know. The precision of Barnes's analysis of the painting—his prose unfolding of that fixed image—argues the same point implicitly: art takes great pains to help us see clearly, not to lie. So too in the "Parenthesis": "We must be precise with love, its language and its gestures. If it is to save us, we must look at it as clearly as we should learn to look at death." When have we last heard language like that in recent fiction?

Barnes's most recent novels, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Staring at the Sun*, have received much praise ("witty," "daring," "spellbinding," "brilliant"), but I'm not sure that such terms say enough about his sensitivity and moral scrupulousness. He writes from the woodworm's point of view not to be merely "daring" but to dramatize the beastliness and arrogance of man. He writes of men who dump their women companions and then decide women are bitches, or of men who dismiss a woman's suffering (imagining things) and think only about their own comforts (beer, sex). He is not afraid to address the terror of death. His sympathies go out to the instinctive believers, who must try to find something on Mount Ararat—again not what might be expected of a merely "daring" or "brilliant" novelist. His latest novel, at any rate, is packed with moral questions. They are ingeniously woven and webbed together, demanding to be confronted. Every chapter is a story problem, with each answer depending on the others, and none of them easy.

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MONROE K. SPEARS

Form and Fable in Faulkner

ONCE MORE DANIEL HOFFMAN HAS REUNITED THE PAIR SO long and unhappily separated, Old Philology and New Criticism, or Sources and Analogues and Organic Unity, or the *Motif Index* and *The Explicator*, or—to use Hoffman's own terms, and abandon this academic facetiousness—Fable and Form. In *Faulkner's Country Matters*[1] he uses the same critical approach, stressing fable (folklore, legend, myth, history) while giving equal weight to formal aspects, that he has worked out in three highly distinguished earlier books: *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods* (1952), *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (1961), and *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (1967). Students of folklore tend to have interests primarily sociological or anthropological (when not musical or linguistic) and methods primarily taxonomic; students of literature, when aware of the folklore studies at all, tend to find them irrelevant or boring. Never before Hoffman, to my knowledge, have we had a critic uniting full competence in dealing with folklore studies—including, in this case, even fieldwork of the Mississippi Writers Project in the 1930s—with an acute and highly sophisticated critical intelligence, fully alert to the ironic, subversive, and transformative uses of folklore. In his new book he once more exhibits this union in language animated by the poetic imagination, wit, and sensitivity with which readers of his American epic, *Brotherly Love* (1981), and selected poetry, *Hang-Gliding from Helicon* (1988), are familiar.

Hoffman chooses for discussion *The Unvanquished*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses* because in them folklore elements are central to theme and structure and, since all three were first published in considerable part as short stories, they also offer challenging formal problems. Each of Faulkner's novels, he says, "differs in its form; each is an experiment, an enlargement of what the novel can do." Hoffman's book "does not participate in deconstruction, reader-response theory, or other current fashions of devalorizing the text by limiting interpretation to the way it may be made to support a theory." Nor does it proceed from a "sense of grievance, perceived injustice in the treatment of race or sex, to be assuaged at the expense of the integrity of fiction."

[1] FAULKNER'S COUNTRY MATTERS: Folklore and Fable in Yoknapatawpha, by *Daniel Hoffman*. Louisiana State University Press. $19.95.

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The fact that Hoffman is not a Southerner is probably an advantage: he is immensely learned about Faulkner and the South without assuming that he has any inborn knowledge or privileged understanding of either, and sympathetic while maintaining a certain detachment. He makes few generalizations and no sweeping judgments, his basic rule being to understand the three novels fully, in the context of Faulkner's life and other works and the special context of folklore and fable. Because he is not arguing a thesis, his study is hard to sum up briefly; its value is in his detailed reading of the three novels and their relation to each other and to the total context of Faulkner's work.

Discussing *The Unvanquished*, Hoffman is concerned first to "save the tale from the teller." He shows, as have other critics, that though Faulkner spoke of the earlier tales as potboilers, the novel is far from trashy or conventional; it is the morally complex story of Bayard Sartoris' initiation into manhood and of the South's emergence from the Civil War. It also introduces the Snopes and McCaslin families, which are the subjects, respectively, of *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses*. The "widening rift" between Faulkner and his friend Phil Stone, Hoffman suggests, may be linked to "Faulkner's difficulty in developing the Matter of Snopes." While Stone never changed his ideas about rednecks, Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* treats them understandingly and sympathetically, and "with his sensibility so subversive of establishment pieties, would in time imagine himself inside the stunted, warped soul of a mean little two-penny Ahab like Mink Snopes . . . and [in *The Hamlet*] imagine an idiot, Ike Snopes, in love with a cow, but far from judging this descent into animal husbandry as merely comical-despicable, Faulkner presents it in a *tour de force* of lyrical romanticism."

The Hamlet, Hoffman says, is Faulkner's "most sustained and perfected comic novel . . . the comedy, as always in Faulkner, poised against the tragic knowledge folk laughter makes it possible for us to bear." It "dramatizes the failure of Frenchman's Bend to achieve or sustain love, and the consequences of this failure to its inhabitants." The point of Faulkner's parody of the literature of medieval romance in the mock idyll of Ike and the cow is the "implication that only in so degraded, risible, and conventionally abhorrent a fashion can the emotions that lead Malory's or Tennyson's Launcelot to his Guinevere be experienced in Yoknapatawpha County. In a community whose Persephone has been sacrificed out of conventionality and greed, only an idiot can be a true lover. . . ."

Hoffman's interpretation of *Go Down, Moses*, and especially of "The Bear," is the triumphant justification of his approach. While rigorous in fulfilling the demands of logic and common sense, he openly (and, in my opinion, rightly) takes into account personal feelings and reactions, as when he calls Ike's encounter with the snake "one of the most touching, the most nearly unbearable moments in American

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fiction." "The Bear," he says truly, "is at once so simple and so complex that it surrenders its meaning to the conscious mind only after repeated readings and much brooding. Yet it communicates its significance instantaneously. . . . One reason why this is true . . . is that the events of the plot correspond to several of those patterns of behavior which are intrinsic to our cultural experience, indeed may be a part of the biological inheritance of man." Hoffman goes on to describe the archetypes of the Hunt of the Sacred Beast, from *Gilgamesh* to *Moby-Dick*, and the Quest for spiritual truth; he adds the pattern of Initiation, for the Hunt is the first stage of Ike's initiation, his realization that the Hunt is a Quest is the second, and the third is his initiation into knowledge of evil. Finally, Ike attempts expiation of the sins of his fathers. These basic patterns, Hoffman says, are in "The Bear" imbedded in conflicts and tensions characteristic of American life: the tensions "between wilderness and civilization, between the Red Man's ethic and the White Man's exploitative way of life; the conflict between freedom and slavery; and between instinctual, pagan values and Christian obligations, between unfallen freedom and knowledge of sin."

What Ike learns from his shaman is "to seek purity by divesting himself in the wilderness of the appurtenances of human civilization, so that . . . he may be worthy to see the Great Bear and prove that his soul has shed its complicity in human guilt." For Ike, as for Sam, "the purpose of the hunt is not to slay, but to see Old Ben: vision is the end, and the end is visionary." Sam had become "a celibate priest whose bride was the wilderness," and Ike follows this path, for "he could find, in the culture of the white South, no model as compelling as that of his Chickasaw preceptor. . . ." Ike is "the Grail Knight in Faulkner's Southern Quest. . . . He is not only a shaman, he is a Christian with full knowledge of original sin—and a Calvinist conscience."

Hoffman's discussion of these intertwined themes of the Imitation of Christ and of race relations in Faulkner's other novels as compared to *Go Down, Moses* is remarkably penetrating and suggestive. In *A Fable*, he says, the hero is suprahuman, his undefiled purity contrasted to the world of history. *Light in August* seems designed, in contrast, to demonstrate "the total inapplicability of the life of Jesus to contemporary life." There is a parallel with the Gospel of John, but it remains arcane. "The implied mythical prototype behind Joe Christmas's tragic story is the Waste Land, the ultimate dystopia we have made of our inheritance." The echoes of Christ's life in Joe's life and death are "parodic, satirical, distorted, grotesque. . . ." On the other hand, in *Go Down, Moses* the hero, Isaac, is no bastard outcast but the heir to a plantation. His name suggests his role as "an averted sacrifice to the Lord." The theme of Isaac's imitation of Christ is embedded in a historical chronicle of a family over five generations, from the wilderness to 1942, which "intertwines several mythic prototypes—the doom of an aristocratic family, exile from Eden, the imitation of

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Christ—in the historical matrix of the South, with its legacy of the division between the races and its inherited burdens of lust and guilt. History becomes myth, myth becomes history in this work in which, avoiding the parodic bitterness of the earlier *Light in August* and the allegorical simplifications of the later *A Fable*, Faulkner, at the height of his creative powers, successfully fused the representation of reality with his imagination of the experience of the South."

In "Pantaloon in Black" (in *Go Down, Moses*), Faulkner implies, as he does in the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury*, "that the blacks in Yoknapatawpha are capable of qualities of love unattained by the whites, despite, or perhaps because of, their lives of suffering, their lack of sophistication and worldly advantages." In "The Bear" Faulkner "emphasizes Sam's Negro blood and associates him with the blacks who inherited from Africa their knowledge of a freedom exempt from the corruptions of white civilization. Sam's blood is mixed, mongrel—as is that of the fyce, like him 'mongrel and manyfathered.' Lion, too, was a mongrel. Mixed blood, mingled races, thus appear as inherent goods. . . ." Although Ike knew his spiritual guide, Sam, was of mongrel blood, he cannot accept racial mixing. In part this is because miscegenation was Carothers' original sin and Ike cannot imagine repeating the mingling without repeating the sin. "After all, in the South, with intermarriage a social anathema, the only way the races could be mixed would be by seduction and bastardy." "For now, in 1940, Ike cannot by himself lift the curse of the South, cannot free himself of that curse, cannot imagine that it will soon be lifted. Not even his numinous experience in the deep woods saves him. . . . '*Pity and love of justice and of liberty*' is not the same as love. . . . That wilderness ethic does not contain, along with its other virtues, *caritas*, as defined and required by Christianity. . . ." Ike recognizes his own divinely appointed role and consciously imitates Jesus. Yet the evil, the inheritance, that Ike would repudiate is intractable. He refuses to claim the tainted land of his inheritance or beget children to whom the sins and lusts of the fathers can be passed on. "And so he lives, wifeless though unwidowered, childless, into the time when half the county calls him Uncle Ike." So his imitation of Christ is incomplete. "His renunciations purify his own life but have no effect on anyone else's. Ike does not, after all, become the culture hero, the role that had seemed destined for one who passed the wilderness tests and was found worthy to approach the divine totem. Ike proves to be instead the failed culture hero, Percival, not Launcelot; the one who seemed chosen to redeem his country but fails to do so because of a human failing, a lack, ultimately, of compassion."[2]

[2] Hoffman comments that "Ike's predicament is Faulkner's own: while seeking freedom and redemption from his inheritance of the South, he is trapped in time. . . . Some critics have faulted Faulkner for not having foreseen the civil rights movement;

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After *Go Down, Moses*, Hoffman says, Faulkner continued to explore these problems, but with less intensity; each of his remaining books is a sort of sequel to one or more of the earlier ones. *The Town* and *The Mansion* round out the Snopes trilogy, but are inferior to *The Hamlet*, "a powerful fable of archetypal actions and characters steeped in folklore." *Intruder in the Dust* and *A Fable* may be taken as sequels to *Go Down, Moses*; *Requiem for a Nun* is, of course, a sequel to *Sanctuary*, but lacking its "savage force." Faulkner's last book, *The Reivers*, reaches back to *Go Down, Moses* for Boon Hogganbeck and to *Sanctuary* and *The Mansion* for the brothel keeper Miss Reba; it "resembles *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* in being the chronicle of a boy's initiation into life, but lacks the intensity of the earlier novels. . . ." Summing up, Hoffman concludes: "When Faulkner's tales approach contemporary time the writing becomes noticeably shaky. . . . Faulkner's great subject was the past. . . . His works have greatest power when he imagines the past as fable, when he brings before us lives whose acts and thoughts vivify the myths and folktales that deeply embody the inheritance of our culture."

Faulkner's Country Matters is an indispensable book; directly, but patiently and sensibly confronting the ultimate questions of meaning in these three major novels, it throws much new light on them and on Faulkner's work in general. Tightly written and rigorously argued, it is nevertheless lively and witty; all Faulkner critics will have to take it into account, and the general reader who gives it close attention will find it exhilarating as well as enlightening.

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by his townsfolk, however, during his lifetime he was much abused as a 'nigger lover'. . . ."

Hoffman's comparison of "The Bear" to *Huckleberry Finn* is illuminating: "This story of 'the heart's driving complexity' takes its place in the tradition of, and in part derives from, another tale of a Southern boy's discipleship to a black man and initiation into the irremediable evils of the white man's world. Huck Finn is apprentice to Jim as sorcerer; for it is Jim who had knowledge of the supernatural, is adept at divination, knows the charms and spells, and is in touch with the majesty of nature." Huck and Jim, too, are "dispossessed of Eden" and learn the evil of slavery, though Twain "attacks not slavery alone but human nature itself. . . ."

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Poetry Chronicle

IN THIS ERA OF THE DRAB, self-afflicted first person singular lyric, it's refreshing to find poets who try to write beyond themselves. A poet can't aim for the descriptive precision of the chemist whose objects are silent, or the truth of the religious man whose Object is univocal; poetry's object is human action, and nothing can dispel its ambiguity. For human agents are talkers, the better part of valor is usually speech and actions take on their efficacy and meaning through what we say about them. Our social reality emerges as much from the dissensions as the agreements in all this talk. Nonetheless, a poet needn't and shouldn't settle for mere subjectivity. The stubborn fixities of nature on the one hand, and the moral imperatives of the past and the future on the other, are always with us as constraint and resource to lead us beyond the little circle of the self. All the poets I'll review in this chronicle to a greater or lesser extent try to honor them.

The poetry of Wyatt Prunty has always been dense, half-narrative, muted and domestic. Domesticity should not be confused with subjectivity. Though unhappy families can bury their members in a strange collective selfishness, happy ones are schools for charity and reflectiveness. And the conflicts and losses that trouble even happy families are sources of human wisdom just as deep as politics or war. Prunty's latest book, *Balance as Belief*,[1] contains a variety of stunning poems on the quiet histories of family life, and lets the figures of father, widow, stymied child, speak for themselves, though always in the cadences of the poet's characteristic music. It is a music that glides sometimes, and sometimes purposefully stumbles, catching itself up like a dancer on uneven ground.

Prunty's narratives are never simply stories, and his more contemplative poems rarely lack a narrative element. "The Covined Bird," to my mind one of the finest poems in the book, is a ghost story, and a meditation on the way that children haunt their parents as the future haunts the past. The poet's father, depicted in a mythical time before his son is born, goes hunting and gets lost. A bird he kills, that flew "into his sights as if / Somehow angling home for him," returns to haunt him as the voice of a dead child, directing him to its corpse

[1] BALANCE AS BELIEF, by *Wyatt Prunty*, The John Hopkins University Press. $14.95; $9.95.

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hidden in a lean-to where he has sought shelter. The father digs a grave for the small, abandoned body and flees. His son concludes,

> He said that we were given back to him
> For what he killed along that creek
> And in the house; it was a rush of air
> That's only heard inside a hollow place,
> Something he knew but hadn't met,
> As if he'd slept inside that house before
> Moving familiarly, touching his way
> Between two kinds of sleep, the one
> Deep and generous, the other waiting
> Like a fear born long before its time.
> "The Convined Bird"

When the son is "small and sick for a long time," his father spreads the feathers of the bird across his bed, a talisman to keep one kind of sleep from rushing over into its fearful other.

In another poem, the poet is a father teaching his little girl to ride a bicycle. Though the poem deals with the father's emotions as he watches his daughter struggle with her failure and desire, the point of it all is loving detachment. He cannot ride the bicycle for her nor, ultimately, can he keep her from mastering the skills of departure.

> Tomorrow, though I will run behind,
> Arms out to catch her, she'll tilt then balance wide
> Of my reach, till distance makes her small,
> Smaller, beyond the place I stop and know
> That to teach her I had to follow
> And when she learned I had to let her go.
> "Learning the Bicycle"

Such a reflective storyteller is always stopping to ask what the telling of stories means, or to illustrate reflections with a story. So Prunty's poetry is full of interruptions and sidelong glances, and the remembrance of old expectations, now irrevocably altered by their coming true.

A reader who flips through Baron Wormser's *Atoms, Soul Music and Other Poems*[2] will find any occurrences of the word "I" few and far between. Most of the poems have the impersonality of good political journalism, with sufficient shape and linguistic soulfulness to keep them firmly on the side of poetry. The formal sobriety of Wormser's language recalls Dryden, and his wit, Pope, no matter how avant-garde his subject matter.

[2] ATOMS, SOUL MUSIC AND OTHER POEMS, by *Baron Wormser*. Paris Review Editions. $14.95; $7.95.

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The jokes about aspirins and the late-night news
Ring a little less-than-true.
The body avoids itself and what it once knew.
Any economist will tell you:
Wage slaves don't make love, they screw.

Some modern help is always forthcoming—
Yet fantasy finds repetition a dry thing,
While technique is too much like acting.
Familiar flesh mumbles more than it sings,
Orgasm is an accountable blessing . . .
"Married Sex"

But the strange familiarity of sex creates its own resilience; the poem concludes, "Coitus tires of dares. / When need is cordial, desire is prepared." The irony of this poem modulates from bleakness to reserved affirmation, a drift that characterizes and redeems many of Wormser's poems. The same turnabout blesses pigeons, atoms, the drunken airman standing watch over sixteen bombers, John Lennon and stray angels.

When Wormser does use the first person singular, he speaks not just for himself, but for a generation or a family, some collectivity that locates and extends him. Remembering the sixties and the time he heard Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin in Baltimore one night when riots were breaking out, he writes,

Whole blocks burned gladly,
The stuff of democratic
Promise freely redeemed,
The grandeur of performance
Burlesqued by riot.

I, too, protested:
Hadn't I been good,
Hadn't I endorsed
Both sympathy and force?
Didn't I love the music
As much as I could?
"Soul Music"

The late sixties were a theatrical time, when televised social distress looked much like performance, and performers thought of themselves as the vanguard of social reform. Nor was this mirroring entirely an illusion; Wormser captures the moment for all of us: "Unthwarted sound was the test / Of embodied, unchurched progress." The words caught up with the music after all.

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Robert Pack's *Before It Vanishes*[3] takes cosmology as its theme in order to wrest some understanding of our mortal human attachments from the great impersonalities of space and time. Pack's memorable persona Clayfeld (in *Clayfeld Rejoices, Clayfeld Laments*, 1987), though inclined to biology as a child, takes the metaphors of his adulthood instead from the art of sculpture and uses them architectonically in the tale of his life. Here, scientific concepts supply images for a meditation in which the autobiographical element unexpectedly surfaces. The poet-persona, as he unwillingly skirts the country of death himself, writes these poems to a real scientist, Heinz Pagels; finally meets and befriends Pagels; and then loses his new friend to a climbing accident. But the intrusion of personal concerns on the poems is always handled with tact and detachment; the self's own sorrows are filtered through a wide lens that sets them in the context of the stars.

It isn't easy to use scientific language in a poem, but the rewards of verbal color, tonal contrast and conceptual richness are great when the experiment works. Pack has always played with levels of diction and various vocabulary fonts, and almost every poem in *Before It Vanishes* contains passages that integrate the traditional language of elegy and the coinages of physics. Some words, of course, lend themselves to both: "chance," "space," "dust," "light," "symmetry" and "star" often play a crucial role because of this ambiguity, as in the following passage:

> . . . Praise to the spectrum of the stars
> receding in expanding space; praise to the night,
>
> which helps us see their colors shift;
> praise to the morning tree whose shimmered green
> turns greener with reflecting dew;
> and then let praise be seen
>
> upon the dated marble where at length
> one lays one's unenlightened head—
> praise to residing sunset orange, glowing
> visible to deepened red.
> "Let There Be Colored Light"

But the tension between neutrinos and apples, however often Pack resolves it in the medium of language, points to an experienced tension that cannot be allayed and so keeps generating poem after poem. Like Pascal, he suffers a vertigo that cosmology's infinities provoke; like Goethe, he cannot reconcile the testimony of his senses with the invisible, impalpable constituents of physics. Pack conveys the troubled response of human inwardness to the endless externalities of

[3] BEFORE IT VANISHES, by *Robert Pack*. Godine. $15.95; $9.95.

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descriptive science with stoicism and compassion, but little comfort. In the final poem dedicated to Pagels, he concludes,

> . . . With my grief's *No* upon my lips,
> appalled because you summoned me to dare
>
> to make peace with the dark that lasts
> so everlasting long,
> I'm earthbound with *good-bye*, but bless you for
> the starlit beauty of your song.
> "Outlasting You"

For scientists, readers of *Scientific American*, and the rest of us who step out late at night to watch the moon until we get dizzy, this must be a disturbing but very moving book.

Denise Levertov's latest book, *A Door in the Hive*,[4] is full of echoes of Rilke. Rilke, as far as I can see, had no political sense, so at first it seems odd to encounter him in the poetry of someone as engagée as Levertov. But in the end the alchemical reaction produces interesting results: Levertov's topical poems coalesce around images full of Rilkean spirituality, and her own playful mysticism, much earthier than Rilke's, generates a novel kind of Ding-Gedichte.

I hope that someone is currently writing a history about the relation of the American public (including Congress) to the countries in Central America, and its complex, half-political and half-religious opposition to executive policy. Part of such a history would include a revealing chapter on the role of writers in that ongoing dissension. *A Door in the Hive* includes the libretto for a requiem for Archbishop Romero and four American women (three nuns and one lay worker) murdered by death squads in El Salvador at the beginning of the last decade. Recent events should remind us that the reprisals in El Salvador have continued all through the eighties, and that international cooperation is still needed to bring peace to that area. Levertov's libretto, while not a poem, is a useful kind of extended popular song whose proceeds served to aid important relief and lobbying efforts; such writing deserves a place side by side with Levertov's best poetry. And indeed, it is flanked by poems that rise to the occasion, providing threnody with its proper emblems: the quetzal bird, a desolate book without words and Rilke's bannering scroll, mowers and the grass that springs up always beyond their reach.

Politics can't provide its own reasons. Why should we care, finally, about the fate of our fellow-countrymen, or the other inhabitants of the planet, great and small? Even the illuminating explanations of history can't prevent their own infinite regress to just one damn thing after another. Something must attest to the absolute value of the

[4] A DOOR IN THE HIVE, by *Denise Levertov*. New Directions. $16.95; $8.95.

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creatures who cross our paths, and exact the debt of morality; we might as well call it transcendence. Levertov has a fine sense of how impossible it is both to avoid and to fasten the transcendent. In "For Instance," she borrows Rilke's phrase *Erde, du liebe* to recall two such unexpected encounters "nowhere special," one in Australia's Out Back and the other in East Anglia, where shed, cart and dusty weed shine and present themselves under "a hesitant trace / of rainbow." And in "The Sorcerer," she confronts the alluring but enigmatic Other in a neighborhood dog.

> Blue-eyed Oberon prances
> for joy in winter dusk,
> the stars
> are sparks from his deep, cold fur.
> Motifs of Samoyed song
> float forth from black lips.
>
> For my part
> I want the indoors, hot tea,
> cherry jam. Yet I linger:
> everything
> instant by instant
> intensifies,
> dusk darker, stars wilder.
>
> And Oberon,
> strange-eyed Oberon,
> meets my gaze in stillness
> and holds it
>
> before
> he dances homeward,
> dog and shaman.

This is an encounter like Rilke's with the panther, but decorated by the allusions of magic and cast in an American idiom.

Dick Davis is a British poet who has traveled extensively and lived in the Middle East; his wife is Iranian and he now teaches Persian at Ohio State University. The tension between familiar and foreign culture, between the gardens and smokestacks of England and the plains and mountains of Asia Minor, becomes in his poetry a richly comprehensive metaphor for love and knowledge. His *New and Selected Poems 1967-1987*[5] (only 125 intensely crafted pages) balances Dara Shukoh, a seventeenth-century prince who translated the *Upanishads* into Persian, against "Wittgenstein in Galway"; "Rembrandt Dying" against an old photograph of a mullah in Tehran; Damascus against Guardi's Venice; Khayyam and Attar against their nineteenth-century translator, Fitzgerald; Davis' dying sister-in-law against his

[5] DEVICES AND DESIRES: New and Selected Poems 1967-87, by *Dick Davis*. Anvil Press. £5.95.

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sleeping daughter; his wife's gaze against and alongside his own.

Not surprisingly then, Davis writes especially fine poems about exile and domesticity, atheism and the inevitability of faith. Here is the poem, "Government in Exile":

> Silence, and on the wall the photographs—
> Farms, mountains, faces; the sad specifics
> Corrode the heart, sharpen the will. Despair
> Is shrugged away and stares one in the face.
> Loyalty is poured out—a libation
> To childhood villages, to stones, to trees.

And here is its private version, indexed by Aïda's lament, *O patria mia!*

> One drawing held her; it was of
> An indistinct but Eastern view
> And had no special charm: her hand
> Strayed to the glass as if she knew
> The contours of that barren land
> And could not stare at them enough:
>
> I saw her beauty then, the love
> Made steady in her exiled eyes:
> Those lines were faint as memory,
> Effaced as the elusive sighs
> That scarcely broke her reverie;
> I watched, withheld, and could not move.
>
> "In the Gallery"

Davis understands that we are exiled not only in place, but also in time; what we have lost and wonder if we shall ever regain is Love's eternity. On the one hand, it is lost religion.

> Inapprehensible, the world: what was,
> Once, almost palpable, is now become
> The names of absences: tree, face, water.
>
> I journey toward another absence, one
> I dare not name, but whisper as I place
> My steps, like a child's skipping-rhyme, 'Lord, Lord'.
>
> "Names"

On the other hand, it is the unfathomed depth of those closest to us, from which their mortality threatens and shimmers.

> I wanted otherness
> And met your gaze, in which the world shone unreproved;
> You were the world itself,
> The uninterpretable strangeness to be loved.
>
> "Afkham"

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The few poems I have quoted here should persuade the reader that Davis is a poet of the first rank. His severe formalism limits the kind of poetry he writes, but is also apparently the necessary condition for his writing at all. And what it requires of him is nothing short of perfection.

Where Dick Davis is sparing of words, Pattiann Rogers is prodigal. Often in fact I would judge that the poems run on too long in *Splitting and Binding*,[6] and yet I sympathize with the impulse that drives Rogers to such lengths. She has, like Marianne Moore, Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver and Amy Clampitt, the soul of a descriptive biologist fused to the engine of a poet's hand. The biologist can't stop naming, the poet can't stop writing it all down.

Rogers' namings can become phantasmagoric, as in "The Importance of the Whale in the Field of Iris," a paean as much to the faculty of imagination as to the creatures it wishes together.

> It is only by this juxtaposition we can know
> That someone exceptional, in a moment of abandon,
> Pressing fresh iris to his face in the dark,
> Has taken the whale completely into his heart;
> That someone of abandon, in an exceptional moment,
> Sitting astride the whale's great sounding spine,
> Has been taken down into the quiet heart
> Of the iris . . .

The namings can exist for the sake of sensuality, as in "For Passions Denied: Pinewoods Lily," "Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew," and "When You Watch Us Sleeping"; for the sake of meditation, as in "There is a Way to Walk on Water," "The Answering of Prayers," and "The Objects of Immortality"; or just for the sheer pleasure of toting up, as in "The Family is All There Is."

But Rogers' poetry is best when her lavishness is subdued by considerations of symmetry, both natural and discursive. The poem "Knot" is a nice example of this discipline, as she plays off against each other the functions of splitting and binding, analysis and synthesis, distinction and recollection. She, the Edenic namer, can tell things apart:

> Watching the close forest this afternoon
> and the riverland beyond, I delineate
> quail down from the dandelion's shiver
> from the blowzy silver of the cobweb
> in which both are tangled.

[6] SPLITTING AND BINDING, by *Pattiann Rogers*. Wesleyan University Press. $20.00; $12.95.

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But nature, not to be outrun, circles around and gathers her back in again:

> . . . the calls of the wood peewees catch
> and latch in my gestures, and the spicebush
> swallowtails weave their attachments
> into my attitude, and the damp sedge
> fragrances hook and secure, and the swaying
> Spanish mosses loop my coming sleep . . .

Since Rogers places the poet, adam-splitter, at its heart, her nature can never be a simple unity. But it is a carefully plaited and cheerful whole, like an egg in a nest with a bobolink on top keeping it warm.

Leo Connellan has been writing poetry for a long time, but only in the past five years or so has it won the public recognition it deserves. His *New and Collected Poems*[7] contains poems written between 1944 and 1988, poems that sound like no one else's. Connellan writes much better than Charles Bukowski, but with the same unrelenting fierceness, fueled by what he has seen of this country's underside. And he writes much more savagely and roughly than Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur (two poets whom he nonetheless admires) about a New England that belongs not to mandarins and professors, but to immigrants, drunks and fishermen.

Connellan's language is marked by a tension between the desire to strip language bare of its excesses, even at the expense of grammar, and the need to tell and retell occasions of disappointed hope until they offer up their meaning. The result is a strange sort of narrative where the poet paces the same square of turf or midnight hour over and over in words that seem to take up half the usual volume.

> Minook, Illinois,
> one street out of nowhere through cornstalks.
> Winter clutched the cornfields into Chicago.
> Cold, we couldn't get in out of the cold.
>
> But a lonely filling station owner risked
> letting his death in out of the night.
> I lay on his gas station floor and let her
> use me for a bed.
>
> I will never forget the cold into
> my kidneys or lying awake bearing the
> pain while she slept like a two month
> old child on the hill of its mother's tit.

[7] NEW AND COLLECTED POEMS, by *Leo Connellan*. Paragon House. $12.95.

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It was on that stone floor
that I knew I loved her.
"Crossing America"

This is the second of thirty sections, through which the poet pursues the ghost of his lost love, his troubled country, his evanescent self, son of an uncomprehending father. The poem ends in an anonymous city, with the protagonist under a bag lady, forfeiting their friendship for sex. No homecoming here, and no reconciliation.

And yet in other poems, Connellan comes back to "The Clear Blue Lobster-Water Country," western edge of down east, the New England of his flawed and yet not fatal family life. He speaks in the voice of lobstermen, of his father and grandfather, of Boppledock, his alter ego.

So, the boats in, tied
to their docks, an
edge of ice on the
evening wind, traps
piled to dry on
the wharves, we
walk by tourists come
to Clem's Pound,
picking their dinners
alive out of the day's
haul, frantic in
tanked salt water.
"Lobster Claw"

His lobstermen can't hope beyond the boundaries of their "thin frame houses," his father can't see the poet in his drunken son, his country won't face the reality of its abandoned poor. It's as if Connellan, unable to tolerate these injustices, records them over and over until they come out right. And sometimes they do.

Eleanor Wilner's first book was entitled *Maya*, and her second *Shekhinah*. The first term comes from the metaphysics of Vedantic Hinduism and the second from a story in the Talmudic and Midrashic traditions of Judaism. Wilner is one of the few poets I know who can enfold philosophical discourse in vivid narrative without distorting either; in other words, she is one of our true mythographers. The title poem of her third book, *Sarah's Choice*,[8] retells one of the paradoxical tales of the Old Testament, the story of Isaac and Abraham, whose cruelty so puzzled Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard translated Abraham into the Knight of Faith; she transposes the story from Abraham to Sarah. In Wilner's version, God speaks to Sarah first, requiring her to

[8] SARAH'S CHOICE, by *Eleanor Wilner*. University of Chicago Press. $22.00; $11.95.

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sacrifice her first-born on the altar of faith. Sarah's reply is "a speech / the canon does not record."

> "No," said Sarah to the Voice.
> "I will not be chosen. Nor shall my son—
> if I can help it. You have promised Abraham,
> through this boy, a great nation. So either
> this sacrifice is a sham, or else it is a sin.
> Shame," she said, for such is the presumption
> of mothers, "for thinking me a fool,
> for asking such a thing. You must have known
> I would choose Isaac. What use have I
> for History—an arrow already bent
> when it is fired from the bow?"

Having defied God, Sarah prepares to go out alone on the desert, and asks her son to go with her.

> "It's time," she said. "Choose now."
>
> "But what will happen if we go?" the boy
> Isaac asked. "I don't know," Sarah said
> "But it is written what will happen if you stay."

Having rewritten the Bible, Wilner has no compunctions about rewriting Sophocles. In "Classical Proportions of the Heart," she tells the story of Oedipus from the perspective of the old shepherd who unwittingly helped to precipitate the tragedy by pitying and saving an abandoned baby.

> Sitting there alone
> under the appalling light of the stars
> what does he think of how the gods
> have used him, used his kind heart
> to bait the trap of tragedy?
> What brief can he make for mercy
> in a world that Laius rules?

At a loss, all he can do is carry a lamb back home from the cold hillside where he sits, pondering: "There is little drama / in this scene, but still its pathos has / a symmetry, because the lamb's small heat / up close exactly balances / the distant icy stars." This delicate balance is his comfort. Throughout *Sarah's Choice*, Wilner reminds us of our precarious and enduring comforts: friendship, the power of refusal, the power of assent, and poetry itself.

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HAYDEN CARRUTH

Poetry Chronicle

LISEL MUELLER'S NEW BOOK, which is her fourth and I think her best so far, is a pleasure to find. It's called *Waving from the Shore*.[1] Though the two are quite unlike in most respects, I was struck in reading Mueller's new poems by a resemblance to the work of Kenneth Rexroth. Both poets give us exactly the right, and the right amount of, information in their poems, and do so in language that seems to disappear, as if intentionally reduced, as I think in both cases it is, to the merest film between the reader and the substance of the poem. The first poem in Mueller's book is called "Missing the Dead."

> I miss the old scrawl on the viaduct,
> the crazily dancing red letters: BIRD LIVES.
> It's gone now, the wall as clean as forgetting.
> I go home and put on a record,
> Charlie Parker Live at the Blue Note.
> Each time I play it, months or years apart,
> the music emerges more luminous;
> I never listened so well before.
>
> I wish my parents had been musicians
> and left me themselves transformed into sound,
> or that I could believe in the stars
> as the radiant bodies of the dead.
>
> Then I could stand in the dark, pointing out
> my mother and father to all
> who did not know them, how they shimmer,
> how they keep getting brighter
> as we keep moving toward each other.

This is a model of the brief elegy, it seems to me. No attempt to say anything *about* the music of Charlie Parker, which is what most poets would try and fail to do; Mueller leaves that information out. Then how cleanly she moves into the second stanza concerning her dead parents, and how simply she tells us her feeling, using the stars not as

[1] WAVING FROM THE SHORE, by *Lisel Mueller*. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95; $6.95.

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metaphors, but as explicit self-identifying objects. They are not "the radiant bodies of the dead," though I can almost hear a chorus of other poets saying they are. And notice how the present tense is used naturally and normally for a movement of the mind going on right now, leading into the conditional statement in the last four lines. Mueller retains and exploits the tenses and moods of her verbs, a writer's stock in trade that many have thrown away. I don't mean she does it in a deliberate way either; she does it easily. One has to look hard at her poems to see the technique at all. But it is there, a gentle prosody, quiet colloquial diction, the use of understatement to record fullness of feeling, which is still an ordinary feeling. Here is a poem called "Magnolia."

> This year spring and summer decided
> to make it quick, roll themselves into one
> season of three days
> and steam right out of winter.
> In the front yard the reluctant
> magnolia buds lost control
> and suddenly stood wide open.
> Two days later their pale pink silks
> heaped up around the trunk
> like cast-off petticoats.
>
> Remember how long spring used to take?
> And how long from the first locking of fingers
> to the first real kiss? And after that
> the other eternity, endless motion
> toward the undoing of a button?

Utter naturalness, one would say. Then one looks back to see how all the objects and events in the first strophe prepare for the sexuality of the second, though this in itself is almost nothing compared with what the poem really accomplishes, an evocation of nostalgia, astonishment, suddenness, fate, and who knows what more? An ordinary feeling, as I've said, which is exact and has no name, two simple qualities which the poem somehow makes complexly apparent.

The kind of complexity in Paul Zweig's poems is different and more on the surface. Myself, I haven't cared much for it in the past, because it seemed to me a species of leftover modernism, too officiously esthetic. In his first book Zweig wrote:

> Burning what I own,
> Burning this fuel of nerves and money;
> Soon I will be a voice hidden among ruins,
> Too poor to be flesh.

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Is this a lament or a celebration? I hear in it an assertive post-romanticism that is solipsistic and pseudo-suicidal. Zweig could be witty and at ease in places, but a lachrymose manner is pervasive, along with a good deal of unnecessary obscurity, as if he were half-hiding, half-exposing his peeved ego. He wrote: "When words make nothing happen they turn against the sayer." A proverb for a failed Wallace Stevens.

But this is not what I want to say primarily about Zweig's *Selected and Last Poems*, which has been edited and introduced by C.K. Williams.[2] The section of "Last Poems" contains nine pieces, including a four-page unfinished poem. In his introduction Williams says these poems were "written in a frenzy of inspiration—as the death that he had lived with for six years and that was by now known and not known, dreaded and entirely engrossing, came ever closer—[and] have a spontaneity, a purity, an energy, and a forthrightness that is nearly overwhelming." He goes on to suggest that Zweig came in these last works to the first full realization of his subject through a new inclusiveness of objects: everything is pulled into the poems, the whole world, as if the poet is reaching and aching for the things that in the past he has acknowledged only as warpages of his own unclear vision. Now he writes:

> I don't know if I can bear this suddenly
> Speeded-up time. I pull the blinds
> And it is morning: white flowers gleam
> Under the linden leaves; the cathedral's red dome
> Dwarfs the timid skyline across the river.
> A town like any other: cars grinding
> Over the cobbles, the perishable mosaic of fruits
> And vegetables in front of small stores.
> The dead look on indifferently from their green horses,
> From their pedestals, where they receive the homage of pigeons.
> There are no old men, only brown, mocking boys
> And girls dancing out of their clothes.
> The old men loiter, silent and transformed,
> In museums, nursing their small immortalities.
> Can you smell it? The car fumes, coffee, breath,
> Old leather, urine, a young woman's perfume.
> It smells of youth, death, sleepless nights . . . , etc.

The complexities have become simplified, paradoxically, in a profusion of outgoingness. A breathless quality obtains now, a willingness to notate, to see, to let the anxious mind subside for a while, to "expand in the life-flood," as he says in another of these last poems. Could he

[2] SELECTED AND LAST POEMS, by *Paul Zweig*. Ed. and with an Introduction by *C.K. Williams*. Wesleyan University Press. $25.00.

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have done it sooner? I'm sure he would have if he could. Zweig was a perceptive, intelligent, quirky poet, too avid for self perhaps, but he wrote many acute lines and passages, and he wrote these fine last poems. His book needs to be considered carefully and at length by all of us.

The new poetry I have enjoyed the most in preparing this review is Nathaniel Tarn's *Seeing America First*.[3] Many of the poems are presented in typographical rectangles with the lines justified left and right; no doubt they were composed on a computer. What is gained by this is uncertain, but it doesn't matter. Here is a short one called "Energetically Singing Against Voracious Earth."

> In the weariness to death, hears beautiful songs,
> simple and devastated like the figures of liberty
> in energetic youth. When all noise has died down,
> song sings itself with an earnest of winter snow,
> causing everything to disappear into its poverty.
> A song he has been waiting to learn all his life:
> a simple, one-way song, knowing no more of lover,
> wit, aspirant—but now content, in fearless calm
> merely to be itself. A bird, still among branches:
> lilts the song from his own mouth to his own ear.
> No one else on earth will ever hear it—not one:
> and it doesn't matter, does it? it doesn't matter
> in any mode perceived of by this voracious earth!

Definitely not academic. The language is fluent, various, pushed to the limits of syntax and diction. Yet is is not at all forced; quite the contrary. It flows naturally and intelligently, as good poetry, whatever its venue, always has. Here is another rectangle, this one pushing language even further, "And Even the Republic Must Have an End."

> Hearing a voice inside himself, not quite his,
> hears it with gratitude so *different* from his, for
> his effort to keep his own voice togethers has
> for the long time remembered been painful.
> What a comfort there are now a voices not one.
> Twice voices growing equally like two flowers:
> they grow twinly, like the breasts of a girls.
> Soon he'll be trying to keep the voices to two
> for others multiplies. Is is the many-breasted
> mother of darkness wraps him. Two might'a' been
> basta: he could live with twos at some length.
> The dialectic, though painful, can be managed.
> More would split rivers, failing in sea-reach,

[3] SEEING AMERICA FIRST, by *Nathaniel Tarn*. Coffee House Press. $8.95p.

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> split forests and mountains on the borderages,
> shatter the sky-blue bowls into the mirrors of
> a hundred pulses, rive the green, hillen land.
> Allwheres the honeland lies in ruin abone him.

Seeing this kind of play again restores and encourages me. It's been a long time.

The title of Tarn's book, *Seeing America First*, is partly straight, partly ironic, and partly doesn't apply. The book includes a number of pieces about traveling in this country, including one beautiful poem, not a rectangle, about the birds at the Bosque wildlife refuge in New Mexico, one of the best bird poems I know. Many of the poems, however, do not refer to geography or national character, but are poems of pain, love, anxiety, separation, illness, etc., poems of personal suffering written objectively. They are written not in love of language, though that is present, but in love of love, that is, love of goodness, love of the astonishing existence of goodness. Tarn calls it peace, and this seems significant to me. In western history goodness has been called faith, knowledge, power, order, freedom, wealth, ingenuity, etc., etc., but not before this era has it been called peace. Everything in Tarn's book is representative of peace. To the extent that we experience his poems we live in peace.

The other books I have particularly enjoyed this quarter are books of translations. W. S. Merwin and Sōiku Shigematsu have given us *Sun at Midnight*, the translated poems and sermons of Musō Soseki.[4] Musō was a thirteenth-century Zen master known as a teacher, poet, and gardener; not the kind of gardener we think of at first, however, whose aim is to produce color and fragrance for the gratification of the senses. Musō designed some of the most famous temple gardens in Japan, using light and shadow, reflection, line, perspective, etc., to create places for meditation. His poems, some of them written in Chinese and most of them in the four-line Gatha of Chinese Zen poetry before the transition to Japan, are quiet, understated, but fuller, I think, than some of the later haiku of Japanese Zen poets. Merwin has put them into four staggered tercets in an attempt to show something of the quality of Japanese chant. It works well, extremely well. All Merwin's richness and canniness of mind that we have known now for decades appears in these very ascetic poems. The 78th is called "The Pure Sound Pavilion of the Riverside Temple."

> The monastery
> like the moon in the water—
> heaven and earth are wide
> The pavilion is reflected

[4] SUN AT MIDNIGHT, by *Musō Soseki*. Trans. by *W.S. Merwin* and *Sōiku Shigematsu*. North Point Press. $22.95.

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a hundred pavilions
a thousand
A complete existence
nothing missing nothing left over
no need for the water to wash the ears clear
Day and night
outside the gate
the wide river flows

Except for dashes and apostrophes, no marks of punctuation are used.

Ikkyū Sojun came two centuries after Musō and was another personality altogether. Zen master, monk, poet, teacher, and musician, Ikkyū took into his spiritual account a good deal of tough realism and eroticism, with the result that some of his poems, which Stephen Berg has given us in couplets in *Crow with No Mouth*,[5] are distinctly raunchy. Here are three.

like a knifeblade the moon will be full then less
than nothing but it's dawn and the moon's a knifeblade

listen whose face is it a piece
of sunlit jade warbling laughing

those old koans meaningless just ways of faking virtue
this gorgeous young whore wears silk robes that hang open
about an inch

No punctuation here either. Berg is exactly the right poet to have translated these poems, which are in some ways more difficult to do than Musō's elegant spirituality. A question of timbre. Berg catches it beautifully.

The reader of both Musō and Ikkyū is likely to say there's too much repetition, we could do with briefer selections. But if you put yourself in Merwin's or Berg's place you can see there's no practical way to make selections. When you are dealing with texts as old and venerable as these, you must do them all, i.e., all that have survived, and let the reader make his or her own selection.

In the case of Yannis Ritsos this is more of a problem. Ritsos must be the most prolific serious poet in all literature. The present selection, edited by Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades,[6] offers 444

[5] CROW WITH NO MOUTH, by *Ikkyū*. Versions by *Stephen Berg*. Introduction by *Lucien Stryk*. Copper Canyon Press. $9.00p.

[6] YANNIS RITSOS: Selected Poems, 1938–1988, ed. by *Kimon Friar* and *Kostas Myrsiades*. BOA Editions Ltd. $30.00; $15.00.

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poems from 43 different books, translated by seventeen translators; yet still it contains only a small part of the poet's output over fifty years. (In one year, 1978, Ritsos published eleven books!) Consequently we *must* select. But with such riches perhaps we can be confident that we have, if not all his best work, at least a good representation of most of it, and this is important. The most valuable European poets who entered American consciousness during the 1980s are Ritsos from Greece and Nazim Hikmet from Turkey; so it seems to me. Each of them was somewhat available in English before 1980, but only in the past ten years have we understood and absorbed their significance. They are somewhat alike, in fact, and Ritsos translated Hikmet into Greek. Both men suffered political persecution, Hikmet more than Ritsos, both were influenced by French poetry, especially Aragon, Eluard, and Char, both have produced poetry that is politically relevant and popular, and both are much in the minds of American poets who question their own rôle in civilization and wonder why, in spite of the enormous efforts of universities, foundations, and the cultural mechanism in general, poetry remains an insignificant part of American life. I don't know the answers. I do know that I envy Ritsos, not only his talent and the immense reserve of literary energy and allusion which he and other Greek poets enjoy in their classical heritage, but especially the *context* of his life and work, the social and political vitality of his immediate connections, which makes every casual lyric applicable, a cause and signal. We can't know what that is like. At all events pay attention to Ritsos. His work is not limited by his political engagement, but on the contrary has great variety. His long monologues spoken by persons from classical Greek literature, four of which, "Philoctetes," "Orestes," "Agamemnon," and "Helen," are included in this selection, are exemplary in their use of literary reference without the least pedantry. Hundreds of short poems, love poems, epigrams, descriptions, little narratives, etc., will delight you. The quality of the translations is uneven, I think, but everything is readable, and the book comes with notes, essays, chronologies, and indexes that are all useful.

It's worth pointing out to readers of *The Hudson Review* that both Ritsos and Hikmet are included in a special issue of *Poetry East* (No. 27, Spring 1989) edited by Agha Shahid Ali and devoted to the work of poets who have been excluded from the United States under the McCarran-Walter Act.

Finally, a few words of praise for Charles Martin's translations of the poems of Catullus.[7] Martin has done us a great service in giving us the best recent, readable, functional translations of the works of our great-great-grandfather. My Latin is limited, and I can't give a

[7] THE POEMS OF CATULLUS, trans. by *Charles Martin*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $32.50; $11.95.

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scholarly evaluation, but here is the original of No. 71, one of the shortest:

Siquoi iure bono sacer alarum obstitit hircus,
aut siquen merito tarda podagra secat,
aemulus iste, toro qui vestro exercet amorem,
mirificest a te nactus utrumque malum.
nam quotiens futuit, totiens ulciscitur ambos:
illam affligit odore, ipse perit podagra.

And here is the translation done by Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish from England about ten years ago:

Two personal problems: under-arm goat
And athlete's feet—your gifts to a rival
Who tried to saddle up your mount.
It serves him right, the greedy sod:
Now, when he fucks, you pay them both—
She gets the goat; he ends up limp.

Quite aside from the mistranslations and the fatuous Noel Cowardish slyness, it would be very difficult to figure out from this what the original means. Here is Louis Zukofsky's version:

Securer a bo? no sacred armpits lair hops as that he-goat's—
out seeking merit with hardy podagra sick cat,
emulous he's the, tergiversator exercising your whore,
miracle cast of your nights' traumatic malignance.
Now quotidian as you to it, both tense in ulcerated ambush:
a love laid flat with his odor, himself pierced with podagra.

What Zukofsky was trying to do, I don't know if anyone understands why, was to create English versions that reproduce the sounds of the Latin. But his English is pretty nearly unreadable and it doesn't give much clue to original meaning either, though to do him credit he probably didn't intend it to. Zukofsky was right, however, about *podagra*: in both Latin and English it means "gout." Here is Martin's translation:

If any ever deserved such underarm goatodor
or ever merited gout's terrible swellings,
it's that rival of yours, who's sharing not only your mistress
but—quite miraculously—your diseases also!
Whenever he fucks her, both of them suffer your vengeance:
she gets your goat & he's the one that your gout gets.

This is a translation still, of course, a little awkward, and it doesn't altogether get past the nonsense of Catullan medical theory. But it at

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least makes poetic sense. And the *goat/gout*, with the pun on "gets your goat," nicely recapitulates the *quotiens/totiens* of the Latin. One could make comparisons with many other translations of Catullus, but these seem to represent Martin's excellence quite well. I'll quote one more, Martin's version of the most famous of Catullan pastoral epigrams:

> Lesbia, let us live only for loving,
> and let us value at a single penny
> all the loose flap of senile busybodies!
> Suns when they set are capable of rising,
> but at the setting of our own brief light
> night is one sleep from which we never waken.
> Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
> another thousand next, another hundred,
> a thousand without pause & then a hundred,
> until when we have run up our thousands
> we will cry bankrupt, hiding our assets
> from ourselves & any who would harm us,
> knowing the volume of our trade in kisses.

This preserves the Latin meter, with its Sapphic echo, very nicely, as it does also the whole bookkeeping simile of the original, and it is quite good modern Anglo-American lyric too. The "brief light/night is one sleep" is obvious, but notice "harm us/volume"—what I have called an inverted chime—in the last two lines and "penny/senile" in the second and third, along with many other such recognizable lyric subtleties that poets in the twentieth century have studied a good deal. Unfortunately the book does not contain the Latin originals, but Martin's translations are very good and I should think particularly useful to young American poets today who want to understand the lyric tradition in which they are working.

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JOHN HAINES

Formal Objections

INVITED TO REVIEW THIS BOOK,[1] I have wondered what to say of it, wondered what might be worth adding to an already overextended and preemptive argument. Some of us have by now heard quite enough about the new formalism and its so far questionable achievement.

I will begin by saying that I have read through these essays with considerable impatience and annoyance. For relief and a renewed perspective I have meanwhile turned elsewhere, to the literary essays of Edwin Muir, especially to that luminous book *The Estate of Poetry*, and refreshed myself in the open and spacious intelligence of his pages, in his unfailing ability to place poetry in a context beyond promotion, above faction and self-interest. Among Wallace Stevens' rare remarks on poetry one finds on occasion a similar disinterested authority, an attention to the thing itself and its increasingly scarce excellence.

With the generous and inclusive spirit of Muir's criticism in mind, it is all the more disconcerting to turn back to the promotional style of the majority of these essays with their characteristically narrowed, contentious and self-justifying tone of voice. One's initial impression is that we have a disproportionate number of piddling Pounds who, despite their rejection of the master's work, would like to emulate Ezra and once more set poetry on a new course, but in reverse.

Among the poets and critics included in this book are some, like Dana Gioia, Mark Jarman, and Robert McDowell, whom I have on occasion read with attention and respect. Others here have impressed me more for the crudity of their opinions and for their rude dismissal of poets far better than themselves. There are in fact some worthwhile pages in this collection of essays, and not all of the arguments are contemptible. Yet the overall impression is of something negative and disagreeable. One essay after another opens on a similar programmatic and self-nominative note: "One of the most remarkable developments . . . to revitalize American poetry . . ." (Paul Lake); "The reflorescence of formal poetry . . ." (Robert McPhillips); "The return to form . . . the boldest and most unexpected innovation . . ." (McDowell), etc.

[1] EXPANSIVE POETRY: Essays on the New Narrative & the New Formalism, ed. by *Frederick Feirstein*. Intro. by *Frederick Turner*. Story Line Press. $15.95p.

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It is not difficult to appreciate the frustration and exasperation of many people when faced with the prevailing mediocrity of current poetry, the trivialization of verse forms, the utterly substanceless claims for attention on one book jacket or another. I too share a certain impatience with these things, and with the general condition of what has come to be called, and perhaps too conveniently, *postmodernism*. One looks at the recent past, at the accomplishments of the prominent moderns, and inevitably asks: What else is there to do? What can we add? There may be good reasons for a revival of metrical forms, for a renewed interest in verse narrative, if only to relearn how certain things were done, and to refresh our understanding of what modernism actually did, what it departed from in its break with tradition. There are for me no reasons sufficient to justify the accusative voice characteristic of these essays, none that excuse the indiscriminate use of terms like "poseurs" or "the comfortably tenured corps" in reference to people who happen to teach and who also write in free verse. Nor do I see any justification for the outright misrepresentation of what a given poet has said or done or intended, nor for the wholly dubious way in which certain older poets are called upon in support of an attack on other poets, especially when we know how little, in the case of someone like Frost, the poet would have approved his reputation being misused or himself in any way called upon in support of a group or a school.

If one had the patience and the critical disposition to do so, it might be useful, if damned tedious, to go through these essays and provide a page by page and point by point correction of many of the claims presented here, the numerous mistakes in judgement, the carelessness in comparison and quotation, and the all-too-evident impulse in some of these critics to discount an achievement of the past in order to make room for something a little meaner, duller, and more recent.

An assertion by Richard Moore that Williams, of all people, refused "to consider the virtues of conventional American life" is so preposterous that it is difficult to believe the writer had any purpose in mind beyond glib provocation. Nor do I see any justification for suggesting, as Timothy Steele seems to do, that neither Pound nor Eliot understood verse, or that they were somehow responsible for an "abandonment of meter." The notion is too absurd to be taken seriously and entirely refuted by both poets in their poems and in their criticism. Elsewhere, Moore devotes time and space to a wholly frivolous devaluation of Eliot's "Prufrock," while dismissing an early, classic imagist poem by Pound as merely "notorious." Actually, for things of this kind and for its generally dismissive tone, Moore's essay is probably the cheapest advertisement for a fictional self I have read in some time. But it is not alone. Wyatt Prunty's academically corrective discussion of minor poems by Creeley and Ammons trails off into absurdity, and his essay otherwise is mainly contemptible.

The promotional element in these essays is at times subtle. An essay

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on narrative poetry by Mark Jarman opens on a moderately promising note with particular reference to E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, and Robinson Jeffers. It is when he quotes narrative samples from poets now writing that I begin to question the direction of his essay. There is something intellectually shabby in comparing favorably, as Jarman seems to do, lines from poems by T. R. Hummer, Andrew Hudgins, and Garrett Hongo, with the work of Robinson and Frost. Not only are the lines quoted inferior as poetry, it is as if Jarman means to say that a certain real importance can be gained through this easy association. Further on in his essay Jarman refers pointedly to poets "working on Jeffers's scale." Whether intentionally or not, a remark like that is misleading. *No one* is working on the *scale* of Jeffers for the simple reason that no one writing at this time has the conviction, the passion or the skill to write that way. And if such a poet *were* writing today he would do exactly what Jeffers did and invent his own idiom and his own forms. This is what good poets have always done, and the reason why an important generation of poets is always individual and distinctive. Anyone attempting now to write in the Jeffers manner will be automatically doomed to empty imitation.

So much seems to me to be basic. But to continue in this vein, calling attention to the more obvious excesses, the half-baked opinions and borderline slander, is for me a dispiriting business. It is possible that what I most object to here is the result of naivety and an excess of zeal. At other times the arguments seem to me not simply mistaken but fraudulent.

A frequent complaint in these essays is that until recently there has been no acceptance of, no place for, poems written in metrical form. Yet these same critics will admit that right along with the free verse majority a few older poets like Richard Wilbur and Donald Justice have continued to write in those forms and with measurable success. The lesson I draw from this confusion of arguments is that the older poets referred to managed in some years of effort to write a few memorable poems, while these more recent poets so far have not.

I would feel much better about the intentions of these formalist poets if they simply wrote their poems and let us dispense with the programming and the self-advertising. Whatever there may be of a reforming character in their poems would sooner or later speak for itself and far more persuasively than all the dubious rehearsals of the lapses and failures of modernism. How impressed would we be by Jeffers, for example, if he had announced in print beforehand that he intended to write a new kind of poem about California, and had proceeded to explain and to diagram the ways in which he planned to do this? The idea is, of course, ridiculous, but no more so than the many untimely revelations we find in these essays.

Dana Gioia, at least, seems to understand that it is not the form in which one writes that finally matters, but the way in which the

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individual sensibility works within, fills out, and exemplifies that form. Some remarks by Stevens are helpful here:

> . . . Poetic form in its proper senses is a question of what appears within the poem itself. It seems worth while to isolate this because it is always form in its inimical senses that destroys poetry. By inimical senses one means the trivialities. By appearance within the poem one means the things created and existing there. The trivialities matter little today, and most people concede that poetic form is not a matter of literary modes.[2]

These remarks were written forty years ago, but I see no reason to believe that the problem of poetic form has changed appreciably in the meantime.

The announced intentions of these formalists have on occasion been compared with a more extreme conservative temper in the country. It is true that at times one senses an eerie correspondence between the assertions in a book like this and the current political environment with its mood of empty forecasting based on little more than a popular poll-taking. Whether the comparison is justified or not, it does seem likely that the revival of traditional verse forms arises from more than a discontent with existing poetry, that it is symptomatic of a deeper discontent in society itself and of which the quarrel of poets is but one visible sign. To put it another way, the return to metrical form can be seen as another means of imposing on an incoherent society some form or order it does not have. And perhaps no one would object to that were it not for the inflated claims for an achievement where none so far exists.

Dana Gioia's "Notes on the New Formalism" is perhaps the most useful essay in the book, intelligent and informative, speculative without being dogmatic. On one or two counts only do I find myself in disagreement. The concern with an audience voiced here by Gioia, and repeatedly by others of these poets and critics, seems to me misplaced, as does a concern with the length of a poem. Neither goes to the heart of the matter. I would say that if poetry is to regain vitality and authority it can only do so by resuming a rigorous criticism of society; in this lies its most potent power. Anything less than this criticism amounts to a kind of complicity in the criminal enterprise this society has in great part become. If this is true, I do not see how the cultivation of "a broader popular audience" can be consistent with it. But here we come back to the situation of the poet in society, to his ordinary citizen duties and capacities, his loyalties, persuasions, and so forth. Each of us must resolve these things as we feel individually compelled to do, with all the reservations and potential losses that are

[2] *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 390.

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Swiftly arose and
the enlightenment of
Whitman

Discovering Ourselves in Whitman
The Contemporary American Long Poem
Thomas Gardner

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implied. Only perhaps when one has nothing to lose can one speak openly and directly, without fear of either failure or reprisal. I suspect that if poetry were true to this idea in principle it would find an appropriate audience when the time comes.

The isolation of the poet in American society has its consequences, some obvious, some not. The position of poets and writers in the university is one sign of this isolation and embodies a certain contradiction. Those of us who teach, whether occasionally or as permanent faculty, are driven to be here, I would say, by a particularly acute sense of that isolation. Yet our very being here is a way of solving the loneliness on society's terms, in becoming a more or less honorary servant of the bureaucracy. From the point of view of poetry having any substantial effect in the world, any potential audience in society itself, the solution can only deepen and intensify the isolation. Among related and less obvious consequences, I would point to the mock-scholarly, mock-professional tone of many of these essays and of a good deal of current criticism as well. It is as if poetry might save its soul by becoming as nearly as possible a respectable activity, a member in good standing of the business and professional community—surely the most grotesque solution of all.

But poetry is not in any useful sense a profession, and it is certainly not a competition, no matter what the behavior of individual poets might at times seem to indicate. It is something else: a complication of reality, a questioning of values and appearances, subversive to the extent that it asks necessary questions; a surrender, a dedication, as well as being at certain times and in certain instances a sacrifice—in which situation all questions as to career and professionalism become irrelevant.

There remains the problem of the long poem, whether it is still possible, whether it is even necessary. In a brief introductory essay on narrative and epic form, its tradition and apparent demise, Gioia asks whether Milton could have succeeded so well without the example of Homer, Virgil, and Dante behind him. The question is reasonable and the answer is obvious. But if one is going to ask a question like that it seems to me that one ought to continue to ask whether Eliot could have succeeded as he did with his *Quartets* if he had not had certain older poets, Dante among them, to draw on. And perhaps one would recognize at the same time that, whatever past examples he may have had in view, the form that Eliot's poem took was substantially a new thing.

I make a point of this because some hard words have been written here, by Gioia and others, in reference to the "sequence." Against all current argument and malpractice I will defend the poetic sequence, that ruminative form not invented by modernism, surely, and which goes back through Yeats to Wordsworth, and perhaps even to Dante himself. I am speaking of thought that moves in considered periods,

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through one formal variation to another, and which says that we do not always nor necessarily think in a straight line. But in this context, as in most human undertakings, it is thought itself, the ability to think, to discriminate among particulars and shades of meaning, that makes the difference. In the *Quartets,* for example, it is clear that the sequential intelligence—an ability to incorporate, to combine and articulate, a number of modes of expression, narrative as well as dramatic, verse paragraph as well as lyric stanza, and all within a thematic, musical structure for which no adequate prose equivalent seems to exist—is the outcome not only of superior talent, but also of a certain maturity. It cannot be taught, and is not now common among poets, to say the best for the situation.

The final essay, by Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel, seeks in a wholly mistaken manner, and in part through a demonstration of recent brain theory, to place the new formalism on a sound scientific basis. There is a good deal that is merely silly in this essay, but to suggest, as the writers do in their conclusion, that free verse has somehow conditioned us to a totalitarian state of mind, is not simply preposterous, it is irresponsible and dishonest as well. I will leave to a more energetic reader than myself the deciphering of such passages as this: "The brain possesses built-in sites for the reception of oipoid peptides such as enkephalin—the endorphins—and also other pleasure-associated neurohumors such as the catacholomines . . ." Leaving aside its grammatical clumsiness, you would think that any intelligent, literate person would immediately recognize the inappropriateness of such language when applied to anything as fundamentally darkened and mysterious as artistic expression. At this point we are about as far from poetry as we can get and still find our way back—a long way from anything humane and helpful to us in the social and spiritual isolation in which we find ourselves, and from which poetry on occasion offers one of the few means of rescue.

The revision of modernism attempted by many of these poets and critics contains, along with a good deal that is merely assertive and obvious, at times ethically dubious, a few helpful insights, and for these I am grateful. Having set the book aside, I can think of no more balanced and useful way to end this review than to quote a remark made by the poet William Stafford at a long ago reading: "A poem is anything said in such a way, set down on the page in such a way, as to invite a certain kind of attention." Our formalists will surely balk at such modesty and apparent inexactness. Yet in whatever mode one chooses to write, at whatever moment, and in whatever place or circumstance we find ourselves, it is exactly that attention, the quality and intensity of it, that makes all the difference.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

GEORGE CORE is editor of *The Sewanee Review*. . . . ROBERT M. ADAMS' translation-edition of *Candide* has gone into its second manifestation for W. W. Norton, which recently published his study on *Shakespeare: the Four Romances*. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's new book of poems, *In the Room We Share*, was published by Paragon House in March. . . . RONALD DE FEO is a senior editor at *ARTnews*. . . . DANA GIOIA's most recent book is *Mottetti*, a translation of the love poetry of the Italian Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale. . . . For the past few months HAROLD FROMM has been heavily involved in ecological matters—writing a few pieces, giving a talk locally, reading a wide range of literary and critical works with an eye to including them in *Ecocriticism: Essays in Literary Ecology* that he is co-editing with Cheryll Burgess. . . . DENNIS SAMPSON's second book of poetry, *Forgiveness*, will be published by Milkweed Editions later this year. His first, *The Double Genesis*, is available from Story Line Press. He lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. . . . DAVID DOOLEY's first book of poems is *The Volcano Inside* (Story Line Press).

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD is the author most recently of *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* and is the editor of *Randall Jarrell: Selected Poems* (both Michael di Capua Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux). . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ lectured on Leibniz in London, Cambridge and Paris in May. She is teaching at the Sewanee Writers' Conference at Chatauqua this summer. . . . HAYDEN CARRUTH's latest books are *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth* (1986) and *Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises and Flies Across the Nacreous River at Twilight Toward the Distant Islands* (1989). He has been an advisory editor of *The Hudson Review* for twenty years. . . . JOHN HAINES is the author of *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire.*

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Illicit sex is more fun than licit sex, Montaigne thinks, and not only because of the added tingle of secrecy, the exuberant presence of danger. He thinks one can indulge in more imaginative sex-play . . . A temporary mistress is entitled to all the fun one can give her . . . But a wife, with whom one has to live for a long time, must be treated with austerity and reserve lest one rouse the lustful tigress within her. She has been chosen on the basis of prudential considerations, with the advice of wise friends and mature relatives; and besides, property is involved.

—Robert M. Adams, "Montaigne and the Ladies," p. 193.

Like Kafka's hunger artist, Sylvia Plath was an unworldly specialist in suffering who performed in front of the peanut-crunching crowd that both applauded and doubted the authenticity of her performance. She too knew "how easy it was to fast," because her hunger was not satisfied by anything available in this world.

—Harold Fromm, "Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist," p. 245.

Some examples [from Mencken's diary]: there is the flat recitation of a remark about William Randolph Hearst, passed on to Mencken from someone else: "Hearst married a prostitute, and then gradually dragged her down to his own level." After lunch with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mencken notes that Fitzgerald went to Paris with the notion of accumulating "new experience" for his novels. "Unfortunately," writes Mencken, "Fitzgerald is a heavy drinker, and most of his experience has been got in bars." An evening with T.S. Eliot left him less than thrilled: "An amiable fellow, but with little to say. He told me that his father was a brick manufacturer in Missouri. . . ."

—William H. Pritchard,
"Henry Mencken's Prejudices," p. 303.

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